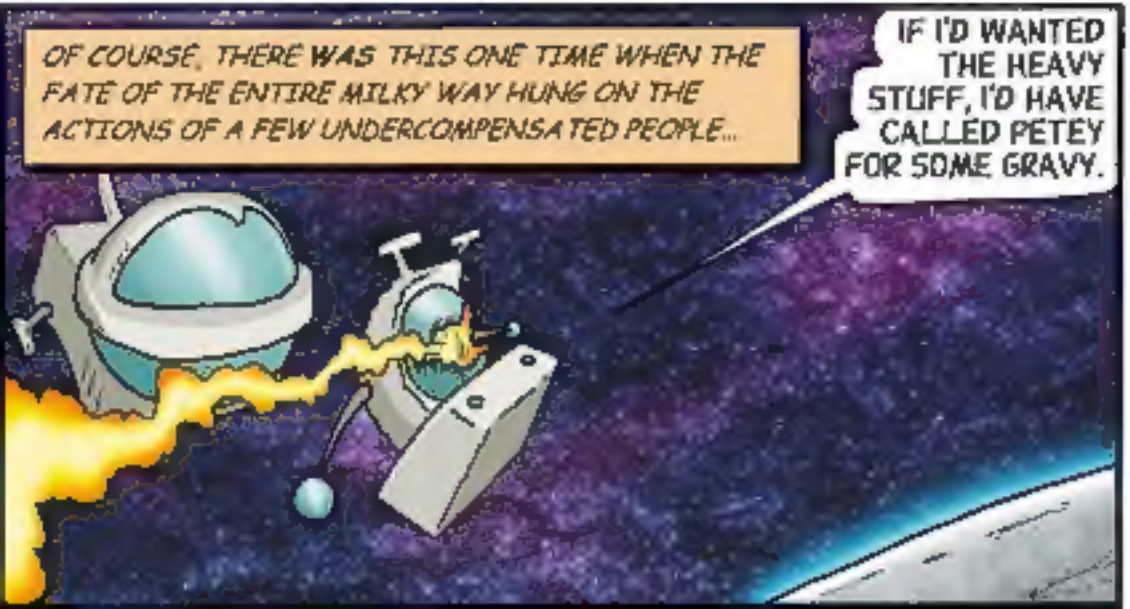
BOOK 6: RESIDENT MAD SCIENTIST

Tagon's Toughs take a vacation, take a new job, and make some powerful new enemies. And then they discover that the entire galaxy may just need to be saved.



Schlock Mercenary

...OR MAYBE WHERE THE BIG STORY HAS A VERY, VERY SMALL BEGINNING...
CHAIN O' COMMAND, SERGEANT. YOU WERE S'POSED TO DELEGATE.
Quit complaining, lieutenant. My suppressing fire worked. They're suppressed now.

SUPPRESSED, YEAH. AND ON FIRE. WE WANT PRISONERS, NOT A BARBECUE.
OR PERHAPS WHERE A MODEST STORY HAD A REALLY SHINY COVER, AND YOU BOUGHT IT, AND AFTER READING IT YOU LOOKED BACK AT THE COVER AND THOUGHT "HEY... THAT WASN'T EVEN IN THERE."
STOP, DROP, AND ROLL! STOP, DROP, AND ROLL!
GO GET SOME WATER! GO GET SOME WATER!

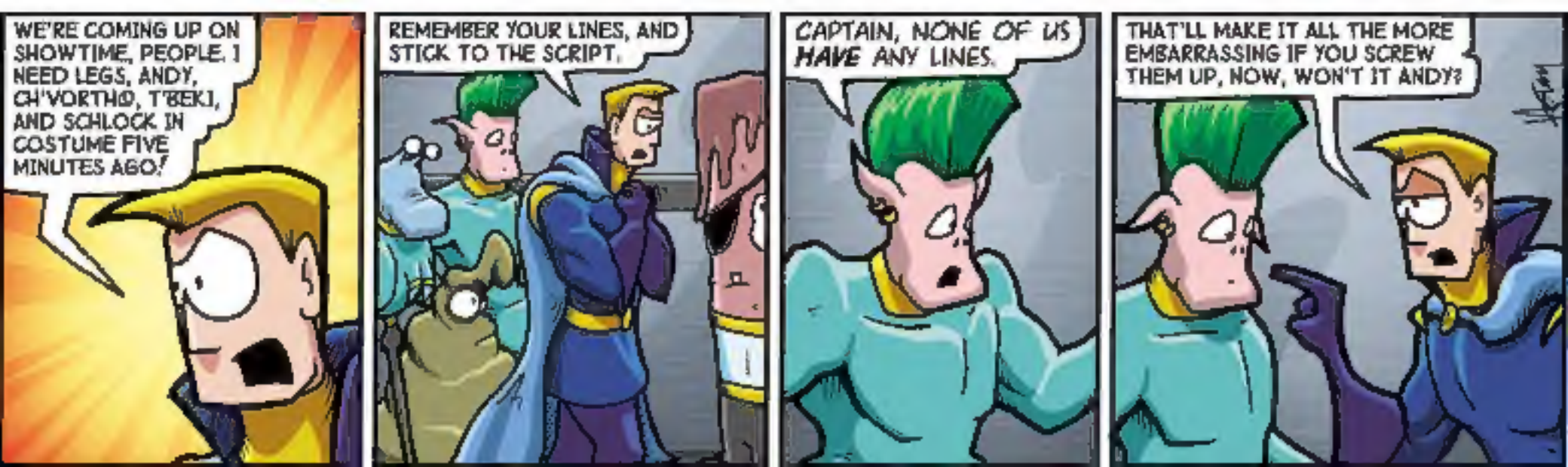
OUR HEROES ARE CURRENTLY FIGHTING FOR CONTROL OF A LOBOTOMIZED WARSHIP
IF YOU'RE NEW HERE, THE BAD GUYS ARE THE CUTE, FURRY ONES. YOU SHOULD BE CHEERING FOR THE PILE OF CRAP.

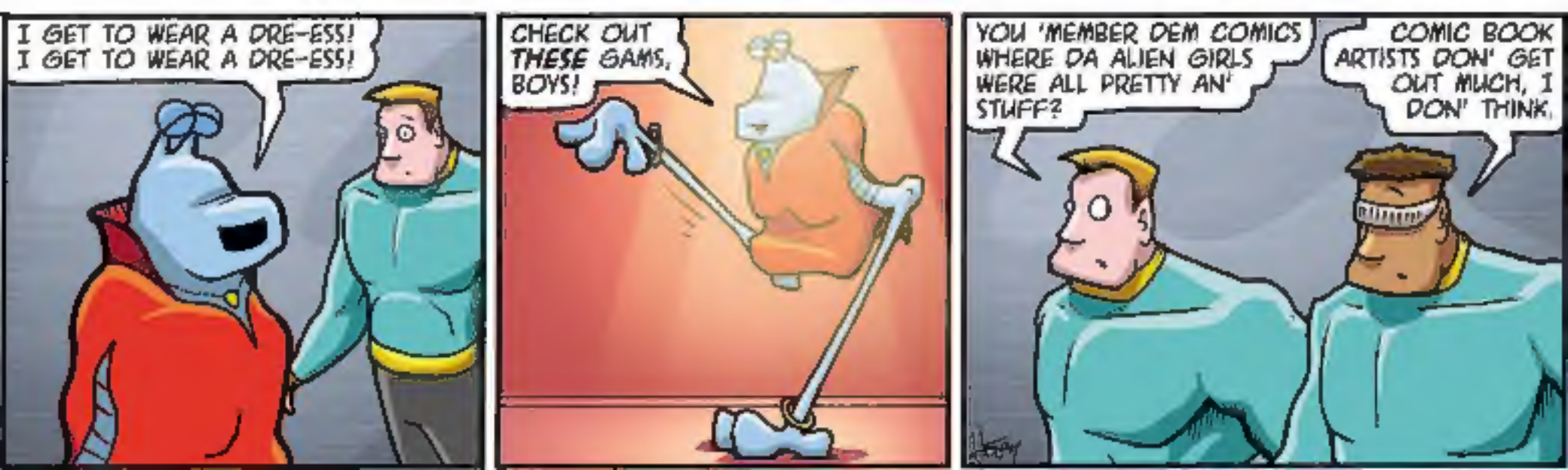
CAPTAIN, WE'VE SECURED THE PORT ARMORY. SCAN ACCOUNTS FOR 96 OB'ENN, 29 DOWN.
KEN'S SLEEPING THE REST OF THIS ONE OFF IN A CRYOKIT. HE TRIED TO CATCH A BREACHER WITH HIS FACE. EVERYBODY ELSE IS FINE.

IF THEY WERE USING BREACHERS, YOU SHOULD HAVE CALLED IN THE GRAVY, ELF.

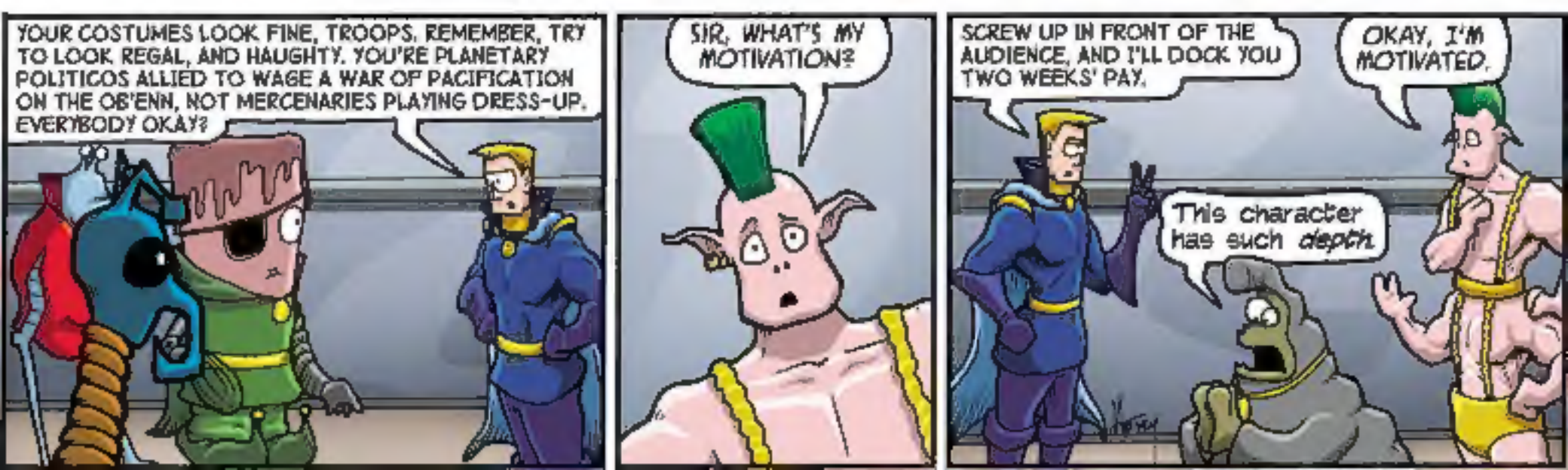
WE TALKED IT OVER. WE'RE BEING PAID BY THE PRISONER, AND GRAVY JUST DIDN'T SOUND PROFITABLE.

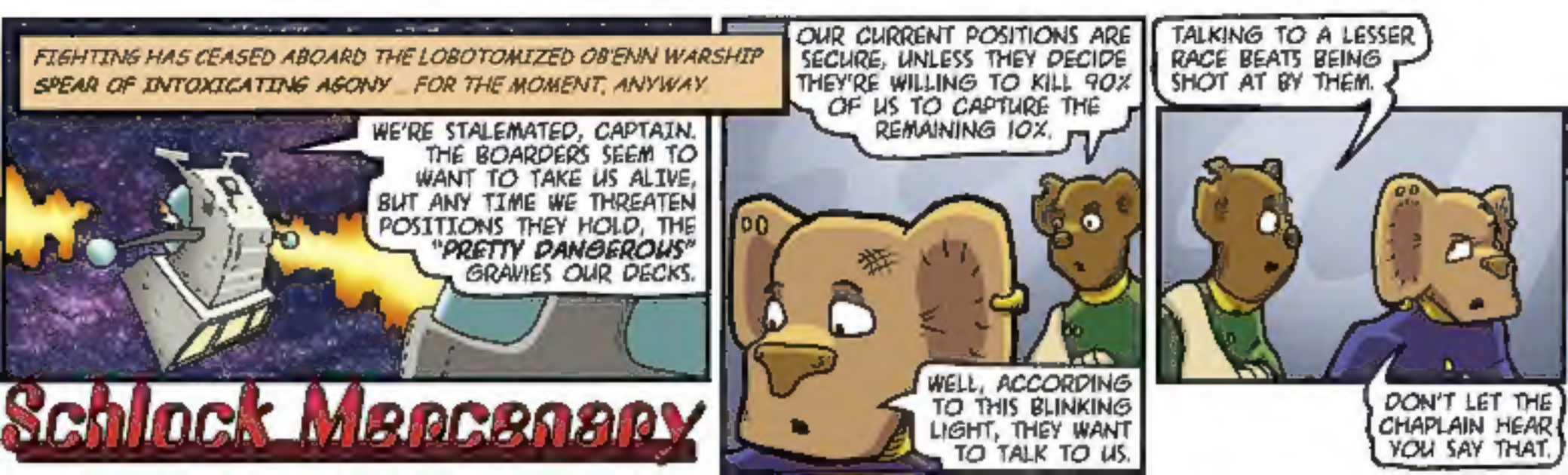
BESIDES, IT WORKED. KEN WILL LIVE TO SPEND HIS MONEY.
Yeah, but he'll be spending it on really soft food for a while.

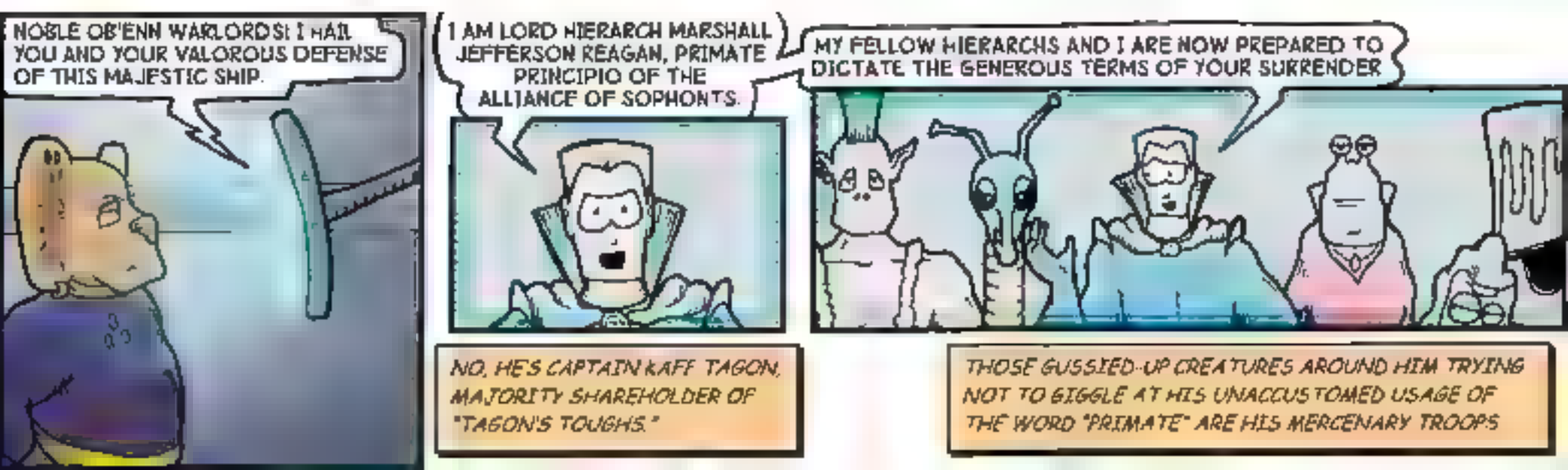

WE'RE COMING UP ON SHOWTIME, PEOPLE. I NEED LEGS, ANDY, CH'VORTHØ, T'BEKI, AND SCHLOCK IN COSTUME FIVE MINUTES AGO!
REMEMBER YOUR LINES, AND STICK TO THE SCRIPT.
CAPTAIN, NONE OF US HAVE ANY LINES.
THAT'LL MAKE IT ALL THE MORE EMBARRASSING IF YOU SCREW THEM UP, NOW, WON'T IT ANDY?


I GET TO WEAR A DRE-ESS! I GET TO WEAR A DRE-ESS!
CHECK OUT THESE GAMS, BOYS!
YOU 'MEMBER DEM COMICS WHERE DA ALIEN GIRLS WERE ALL PRETTY AN' STUFF?
COMIC BOOK ARTISTS DON' GET OUT MUCH, I DON' THINK.

I look ridiculous.
YOU LOOK HANDSOME.
I look like a pile of crap under a tarp.
OKAY, BUT DON'T GO BLAMING THE TARP.


YOUR COSTUMES LOOK FINE, TROOPS. REMEMBER, TRY TO LOOK REGAL, AND HAUGHTY. YOU'RE PLANETARY POLITICOS ALLIED TO WAGE A WAR OF PACIFICATION ON THE OB'ENN, NOT MERCENARIES PLAYING DRESS-UP. EVERYBODY OKAY?
SIR, WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?
SCREW UP IN FRONT OF THE AUDIENCE, AND I'LL DOCK YOU TWO WEEKS' PAY.
OKAY, I'M MOTIVATED.
This character has such *depth*


FIGHTING HAS CEASED ABOARD THE LOBOTOMIZED OB'ENN WARSHIP SPEAR OF INTOXICATING AGONY _ FOR THE MOMENT, ANYWAY
WE'RE STALEMATED, CAPTAIN. THE BOARDERS SEEM TO WANT TO TAKE US ALIVE, BUT ANY TIME WE THREATEN POSITIONS THEY HOLD, THE "PRETTY DANGEROUS" GRAVIES OUR DECKS.
Schlock Mercenary
OUR CURRENT POSITIONS ARE SECURE, UNLESS THEY DECIDE THEY'RE WILLING TO KILL 90% OF US TO CAPTURE THE REMAINING 10%.
WELL, ACCORDING TO THIS BLINKING LIGHT, THEY WANT TO TALK TO US.
TALKING TO A LESSER RACE BEATS BEING SHOT AT BY THEM.
DON'T LET THE CHAPLAIN HEAR YOU SAY THAT.


NOBLE OB'ENN WARLORDS! I HAIL YOU AND YOUR VALOROUS DEFENSE OF THIS MAJESTIC SHIP.
I AM LORD HIERARCH MARSHALL JEFFERSON REAGAN, PRIMATE PRINCIPIO OF THE ALLIANCE OF SOPHONTS.
MY FELLOW HIERARCHS AND I ARE NOW PREPARED TO DICTATE THE GENEROUS TERMS OF YOUR SURRENDER
NO, HE'S CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON, MAJORITY SHAREHOLDER OF "TAGON'S TOUGHS."
THOSE GUSSIED-UP CREATURES AROUND HIM TRYING NOT TO GIGGLE AT HIS UNACCUSTOMED USAGE OF THE WORD "PRIMATE" ARE HIS MERCENARY TROOPS

THE TERMS ARE SIMPLE. ONE OFFICER OF YOUR CHOOSING WILL BE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO YOUR HOME SYSTEM OF TAUSE. EVERY OTHER OB'ENN ABOARD THIS VESSEL WILL BE INTERNED AT A PRISON CAMP.

IF YOU REFUSE THESE TERMS, OR RESIST AFTER ACCEPTING THEM, WE WILL USE GRAVITICS TO SWEEP YOUR DECKS.

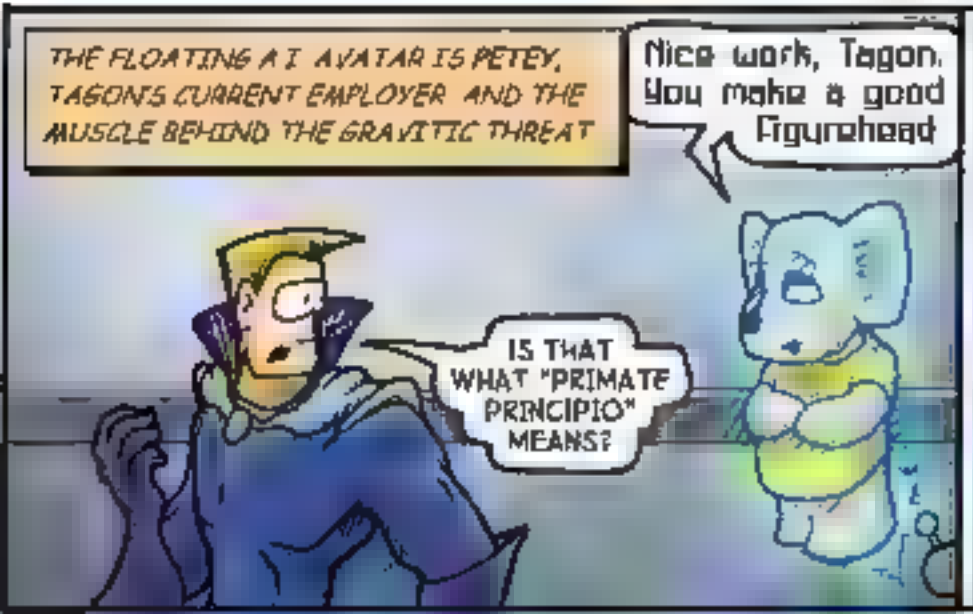
WE ACCEPT YOUR TERMS. BUT OUR HONOR FORBIDS US TO ATTEMPT NO ESCAPE FROM YOUR PRISON CAMP.

THAT'S TO BE EXPECTED. WE LOOK FORWARD TO AMUSING ANECDOTES CONCERNING YOUR ESCAPE ATTEMPTS.

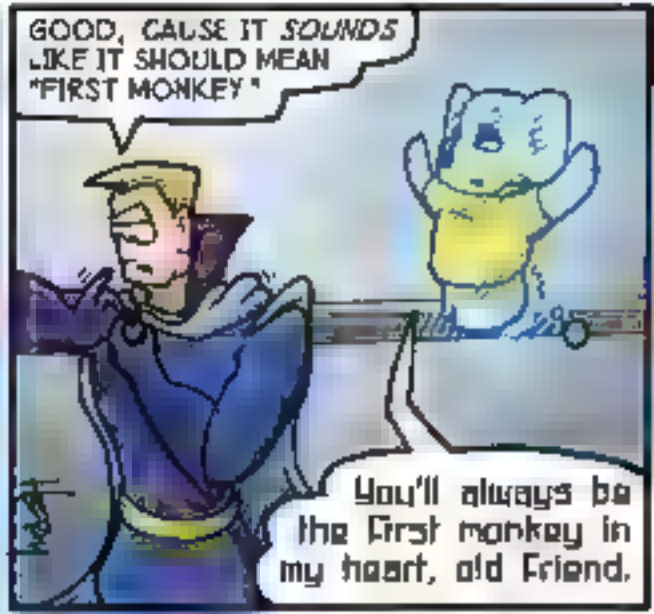
ALLIANCE TROOPS WILL ESCORT YOU TO TRANSPORTS IN BAYS TWO AND THREE.

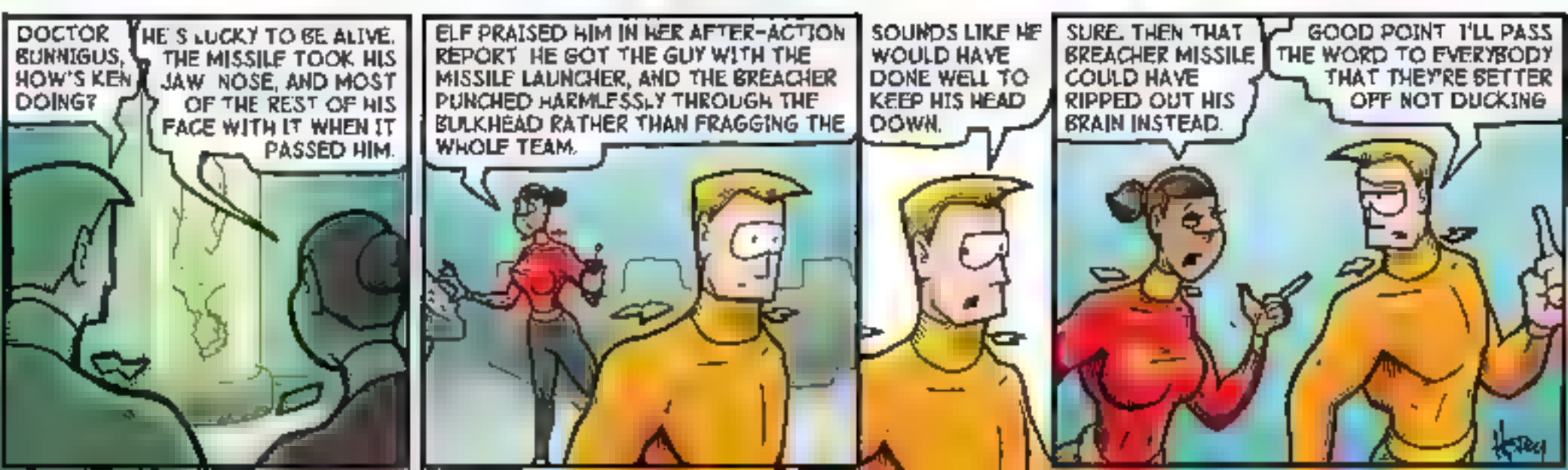
HE'S COCKY, BUT HE'S GOT A COOL CAPE.

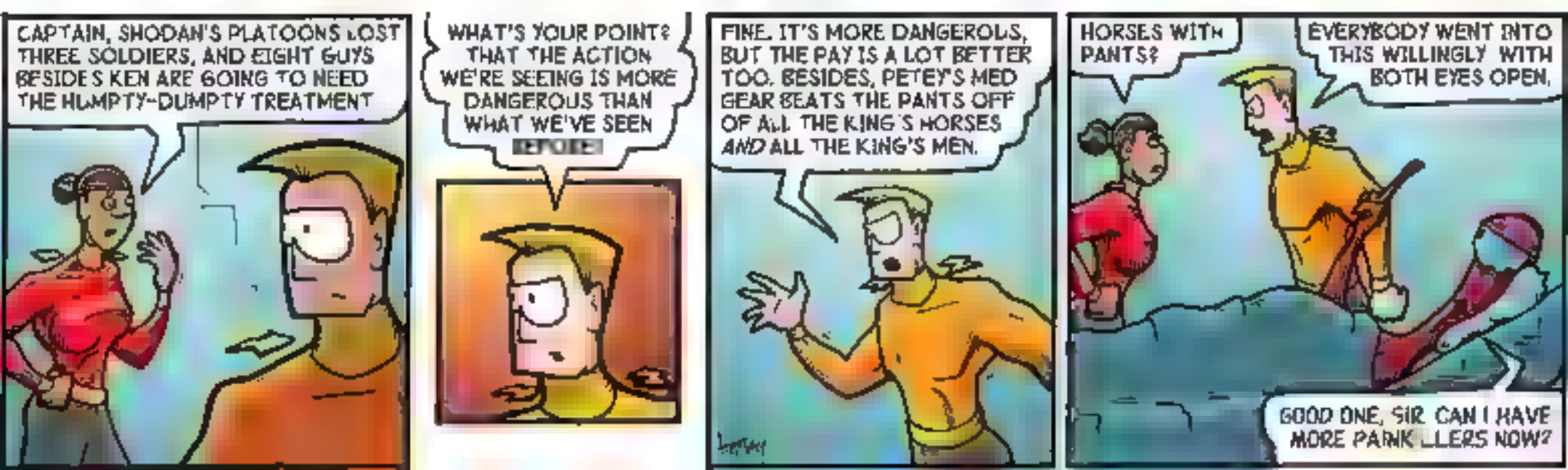
HE CAN WEAR WHATEVER HE WANTS WITH THAT SHIP OF HIS.

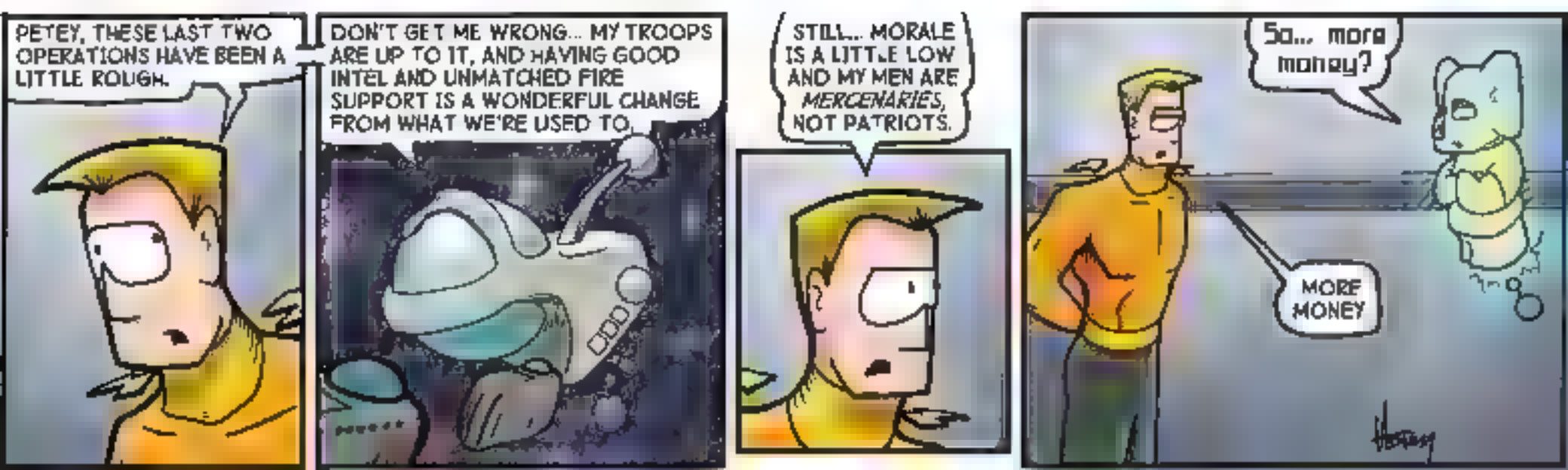

THE FLOATING A.I. AVATAR IS PETEY, TAGON'S CURRENT EMPLOYER AND THE MUSCLE BEHIND THE GRAVITIC THREAT
Nice work, Tagon. You make a good Figurehead
IS THAT WHAT "PRIMATE PRINCIPIO" MEANS?

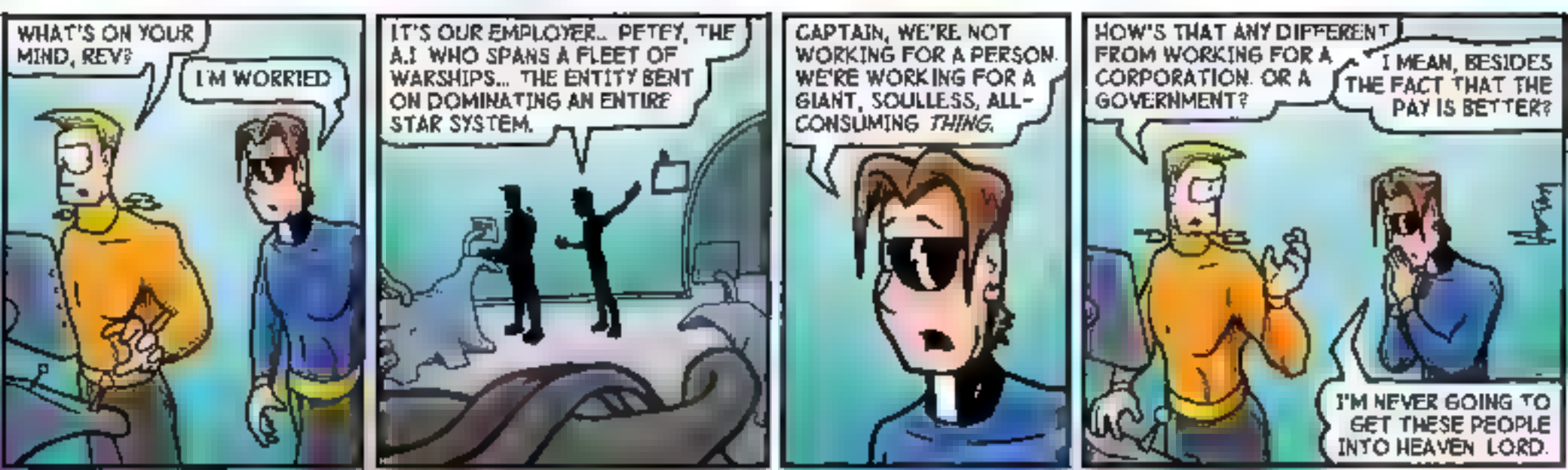
No, it means "Foremost of the regional high clergy."

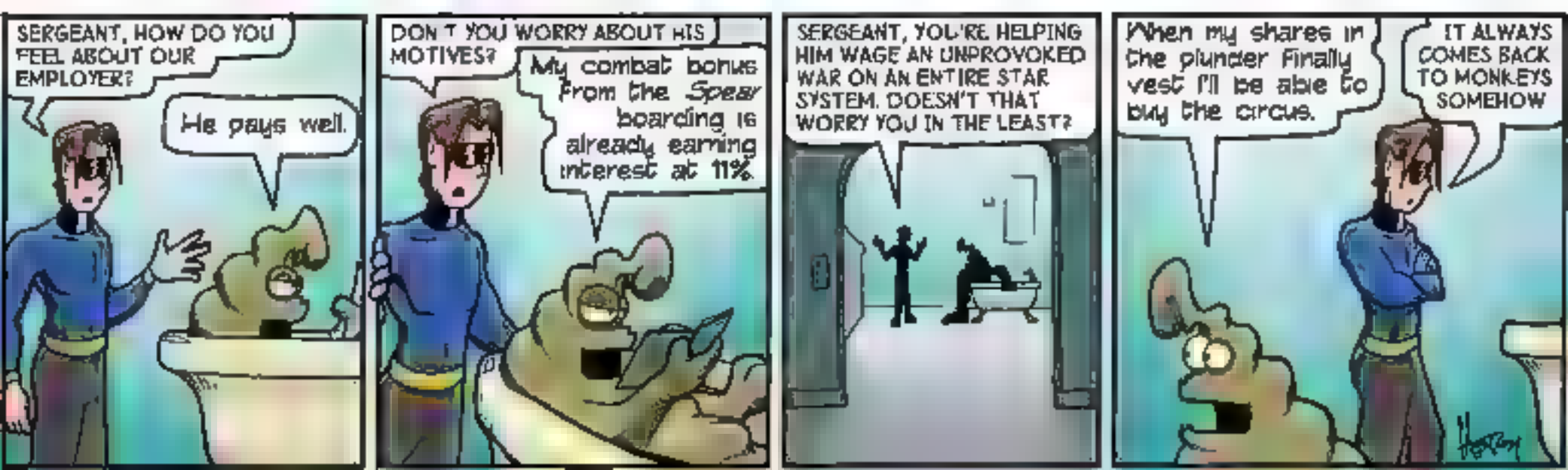

GOOD, CAUSE IT *SOUNDS* LIKE IT SHOULD MEAN "FIRST MONKEY."
You'll always be the first monkey in my heart, old friend.

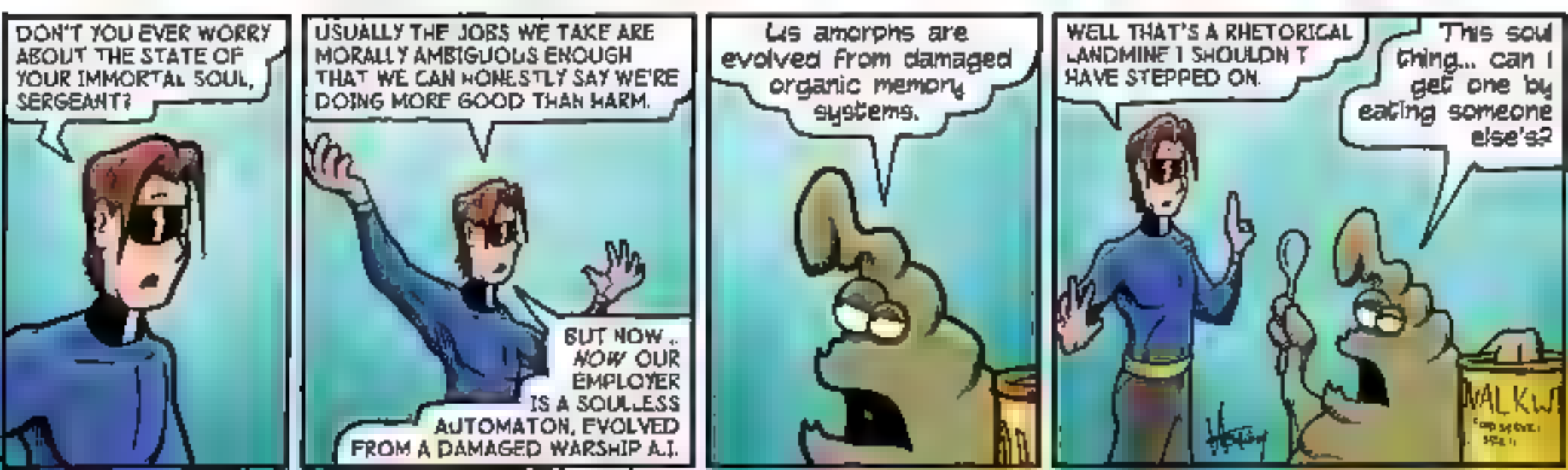

DOCTOR BUNNIGUS, HOW'S KEN DOING?
HE'S LUCKY TO BE ALIVE. THE MISSILE TOOK HIS JAW NOSE, AND MOST OF THE REST OF HIS FACE WITH IT WHEN IT PASSED HIM.
ELF PRAISED HIM IN HER AFTER-ACTION REPORT HE GOT THE GUY WITH THE MISSILE LAUNCHER, AND THE BREACHER PUNCHED HARMLESSLY THROUGH THE BULKHEAD RATHER THAN FRAGGING THE WHOLE TEAM.
SOUNDS LIKE HE WOULD HAVE DONE WELL TO KEEP HIS HEAD DOWN.
SURE. THEN THAT BREACHER MISSILE COULD HAVE RIPPED OUT HIS BRAIN INSTEAD.
GOOD POINT I'LL PASS THE WORD TO EVERYBODY THAT THEY'RE BETTER OFF NOT DUCKING


CAPTAIN, SHODAN'S PLATOONS LOST THREE SOLDIERS, AND EIGHT GUYS BESIDES KEN ARE GOING TO NEED THE HUMPTY-DUMPTY TREATMENT
WHAT'S YOUR POINT? THAT THE ACTION WE'RE SEEING IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN WHAT WE'VE SEEN
FINE. IT'S MORE DANGEROUS, BUT THE PAY IS A LOT BETTER TOO. BESIDES, PETEY'S MED GEAR BEATS THE PANTS OFF OF ALL THE KING'S HORSES *AND* ALL THE KING'S MEN.
HORSES WITH PANTS?
EVERYBODY WENT INTO THIS WILLINGLY WITH BOTH EYES OPEN.
GOOD ONE, SIR. CAN I HAVE MORE PAINKILLERS NOW?

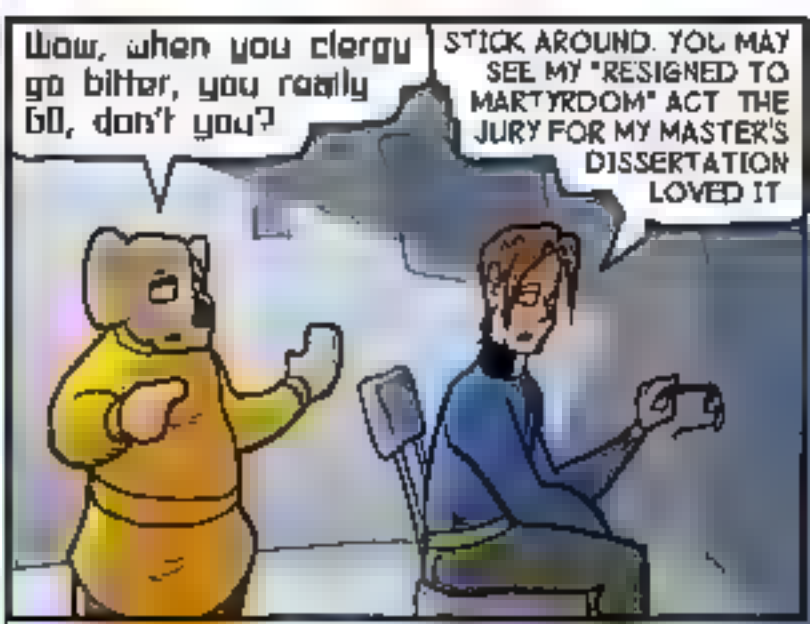

PETEY, THESE LAST TWO OPERATIONS HAVE BEEN A LITTLE ROUGH.
DON'T GET ME WRONG... MY TROOPS ARE UP TO IT, AND HAVING GOOD INTEL AND UNMATCHED FIRE SUPPORT IS A WONDERFUL CHANGE FROM WHAT WE'RE USED TO.
STILL... MORALE IS A LITTLE LOW AND MY MEN ARE *MERCENARIES*, NOT PATRIOTS.
So... more money?
MORE MONEY


WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, REV?
I'M WORRIED
IT'S OUR EMPLOYER... PETEY, THE A.I WHO SPANS A FLEET OF WARSHIPS... THE ENTITY BENT ON DOMINATING AN ENTIRE STAR SYSTEM.
CAPTAIN, WE'RE NOT WORKING FOR A PERSON. WE'RE WORKING FOR A GIANT, SOULLESS, ALL-CONSUMING *THING*.
HOW'S THAT ANY DIFFERENT FROM WORKING FOR A CORPORATION. OR A GOVERNMENT?
I MEAN, BESIDES THE FACT THAT THE PAY IS BETTER?
I'M NEVER GOING TO GET THESE PEOPLE INTO HEAVEN LORD.

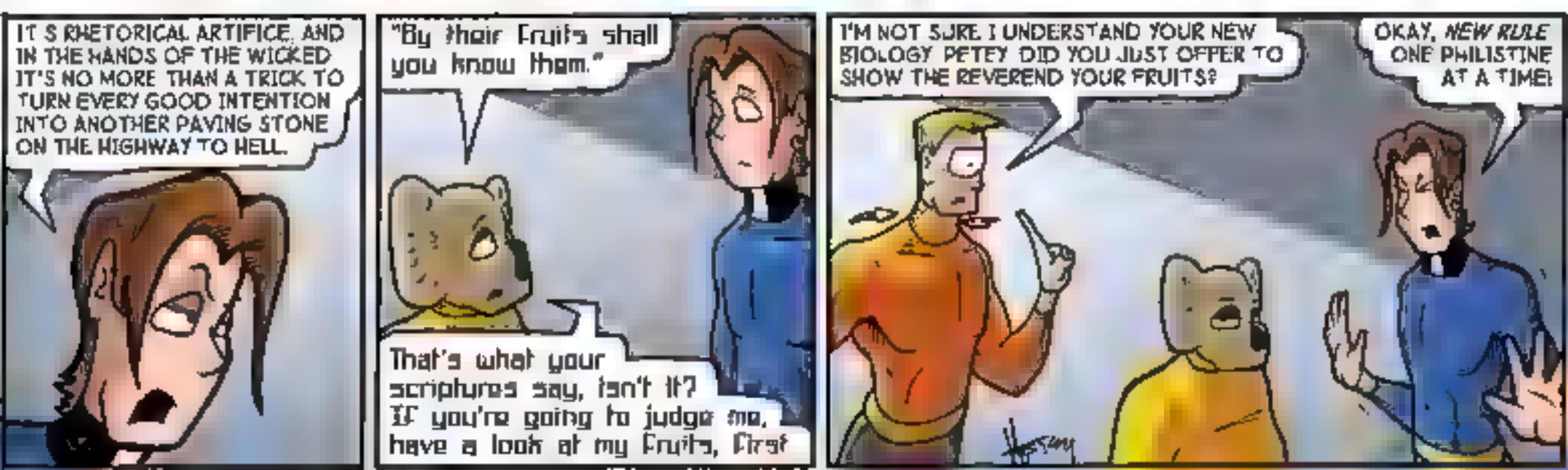

SERGEANT, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT OUR EMPLOYER?
He pays well.
DON'T YOU WORRY ABOUT HIS MOTIVES?
My combat bonus from the *Spear* boarding is already earning interest at 11%.
SERGEANT, YOU'RE HELPING HIM WAGE AN UNPROVOKED WAR ON AN ENTIRE STAR SYSTEM. DOESN'T THAT WORRY YOU IN THE LEAST?
When my shares in the plunder finally vest I'll be able to buy the circus.
IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO MONKEYS SOMEHOW

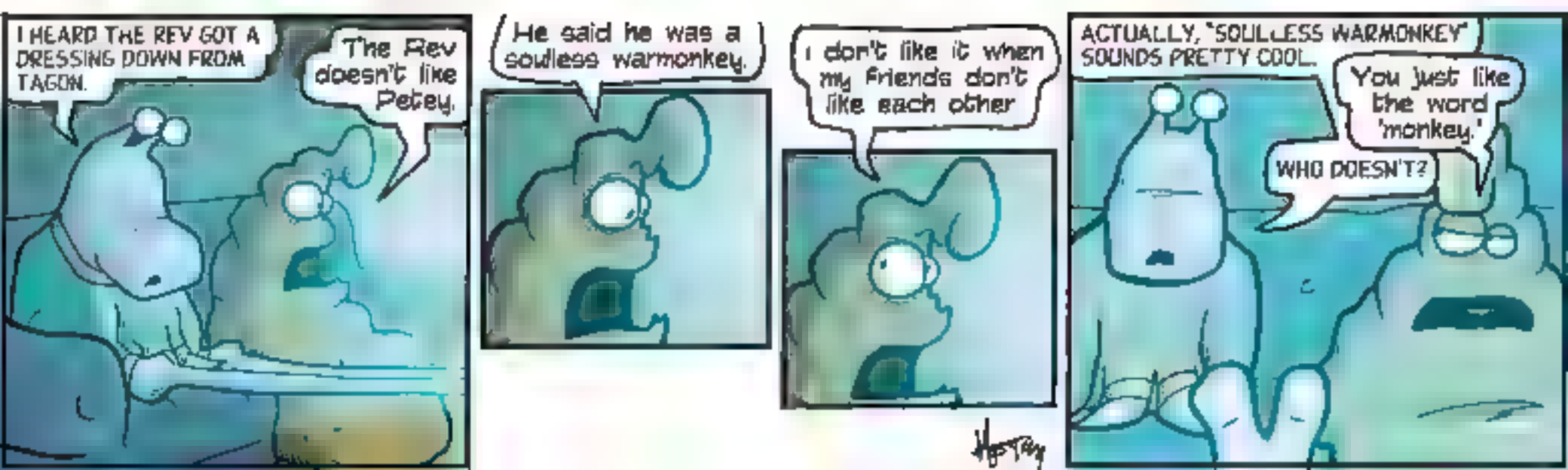

DON'T YOU EVER WORRY ABOUT THE STATE OF YOUR IMMORTAL SOUL, SERGEANT?
USUALLY THE JOBS WE TAKE ARE MORALLY AMBIGUOUS ENOUGH THAT WE CAN HONESTLY SAY WE'RE DOING MORE GOOD THAN HARM.
BUT NOW... *NOW* OUR EMPLOYER IS A SOULLESS AUTOMATON, EVOLVED FROM A DAMAGED WARSHIP A.I.
Lis amorphs are evolved from damaged organic memory systems.
WELL THAT'S A RHETORICAL LANDMINE I SHOULDN'T HAVE STEPPED ON.
This soul thing... can I get one by eating someone else's?

Schlock Mercenary



Fine. Reverend, I'd like to ask your advice.
Suppose I see my neighbor across the street stealing from his next-door neighbors.
Do I intervene? Do I have the right to
OH, NO YOU DON'T
YOU CAN'T USE THAT ABSTRACTED PARABLE TRICK ON ME. IF I GIVE THE "RIGHT" ANSWER, YOU'LL SHOW HOW OUR CURRENT SITUATION IS EXACTLY THE SAME, AND IF I GIVE THE "WRONG" ANSWER, YOU'LL DEMONSTRATE TO ME HOW SOMEHOW I AM THE BAD GUY HERE


IT'S RHETORICAL ARTIFICE, AND IN THE HANDS OF THE WICKED IT'S NO MORE THAN A TRICK TO TURN EVERY GOOD INTENTION INTO ANOTHER PAVING STONE ON THE HIGHWAY TO HELL.
"By their fruits shall you know them."
That's what your scriptures say, isn't it? If you're going to judge me, have a look at my fruits, first
I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND YOUR NEW BIOLOGY PETEY DID YOU JUST OFFER TO SHOW THE REVEREND YOUR FRUITS?
OKAY, NEW RULE ONE PHILISTINE AT A TIME!

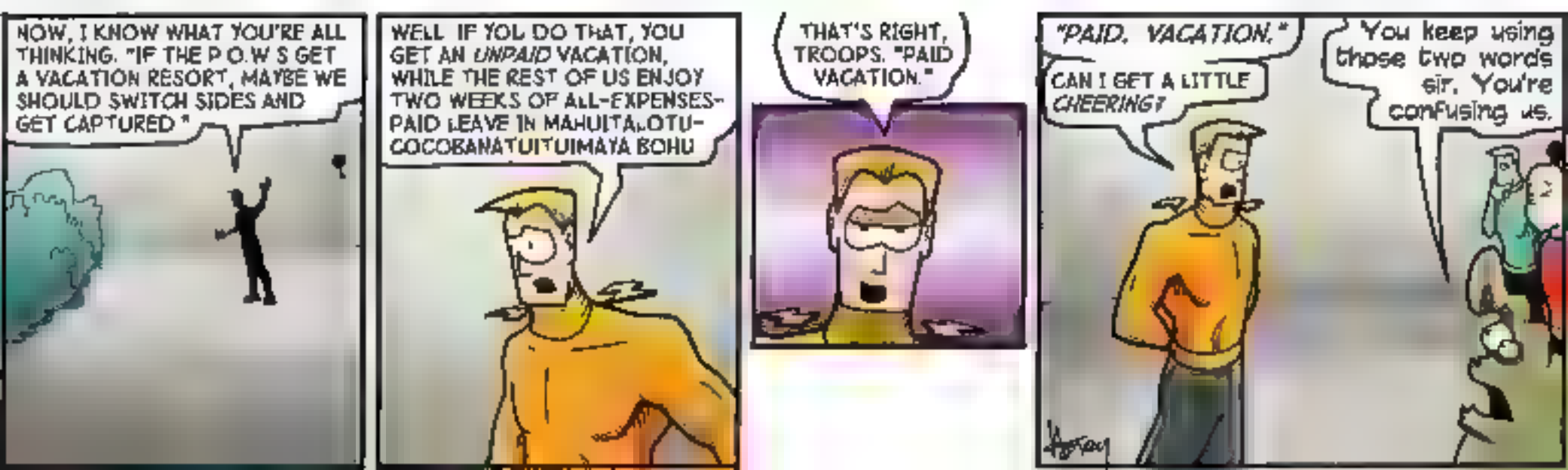

I HEARD THE REV GOT A DRESSING DOWN FROM TAGON.
The Rev doesn't like Petey.
He said he was a soulless warmonkey.
I don't like it when my friends don't like each other
ACTUALLY, "SOULLESS WARMONKEY" SOUNDS PRETTY COOL.
You just like the word 'monkey.'
WHO DOESN'T?

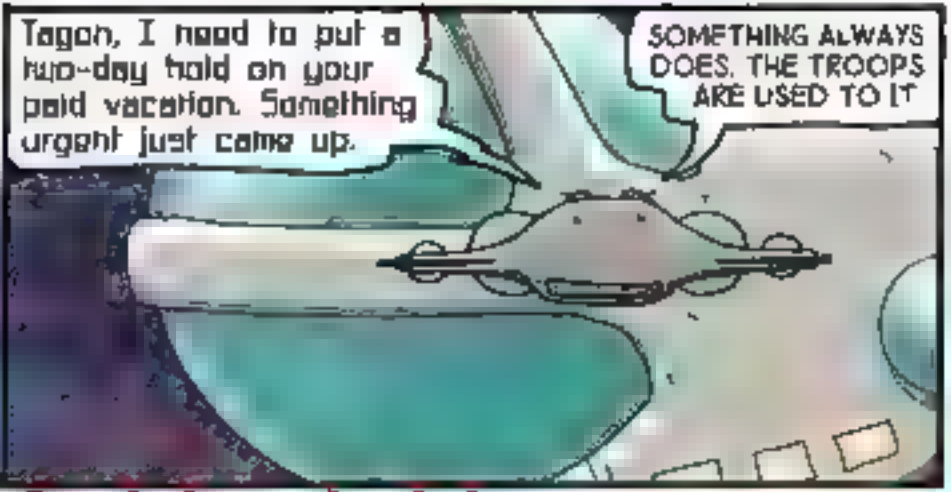
PETEY MAKES ME A LITTLE NERVOUS TOO, YOU KNOW
He pays better than any other employer yet
YEAH, BUT WHY DOES HE NEED US AT ALL? HE'S A SUPER-POWERFUL A.I. HE COULD HAVE FAKED THAT VIDEO WITH US IN COSTUME.
HE'S GOT THOSE LITTLE FABBY-BOTS FOR BUILDING STUFF. HE COULD USE THEM AS TROOPS, AND THEY'D COST HIM LESS.
SO? WHAT DO YOU THINK?
I think you need to stop punching the dead gift-horse in the mouth.

HEY GUYS
HEY, UM.. HAVE WE MET?
IT'S ME, YOU KNOW, KEN? I HAD THE DOC GIVE ME A LITTLE MORE CHIN.
WHAT THE ONE YOU STOPPED A MISSILE WITH WASN'T BIG ENOUGH?
I think it looks cool. Kinda heroic, like it belongs in a comic book or something.
FOR THE SAKE OF THE FOURTH WALL, THE CHIN'S COMING OFF

BOY, DOC, IT'S ALL OR NOTHING WITH YOU, AIN'T IT?
THIS CLONING GEAR IS NICE, BUT IT WASN'T REALLY MEANT FOR COSMETIC GENE-TWEAKS.
YEAH, BUT NOW I'VE GOT NO CHIN. I'VE JUST GOT A WEAK LOSER NECK FROM COLLAR TO NOSE.
I THINK IT LOOKS FINE, PRIVATE.
I'LL GET THE BONE GRAFTS.

I VE BEEN SPEAKING WITH OUR EMPLOYER. THE CAMPAIGN IS GOING VERY WELL.
OB'ENN EXPANSION HAS BEEN HALTED ON THREE OF THEIR FIVE CURRENT FRONTS, AND THE CORE OF A KINDER, GENTLER OB'ENN CULTURE IS ALREADY TAKING SHAPE ON THE INTERSPECIATED RESORT HABITAT WHERE WE'VE BEEN KEEPING P.O.W.S.
OUR CASUALTIES HAVE BEEN A LITTLE HEAVIER THAN USUAL, THOUGH SO PETEY HAS UPPED OUR COMBAT BONUSES BY 20%.
Interspeciated resort habitat. That sounds like a place full of bathtubs, ovalkwik, and old comic books.
FORGET THE COMBAT BONUSES. I WANT TO SWITCH SIDES, AND THEN GET CAPTURED


NOW, I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ALL THINKING. "IF THE P.O.W.'S GET A VACATION RESORT, MAYBE WE SHOULD SWITCH SIDES AND GET CAPTURED."
WELL, IF YOU DO THAT, YOU GET AN *UNPAID* VACATION, WHILE THE REST OF US ENJOY TWO WEEKS OF ALL-EXPENSES-PAID LEAVE IN MAHUITA, OTU-COCOBANATUITUIMAYA BOHU
THAT'S RIGHT, TROOPS. "PAID VACATION."
"PAID. VACATION."
CAN I GET A LITTLE *CHEERING?*
You keep using those two words sir. You're confusing us.



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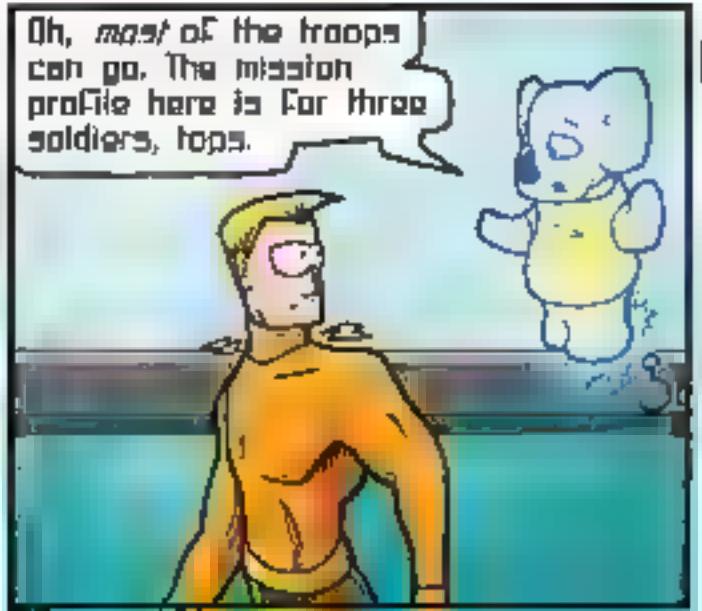
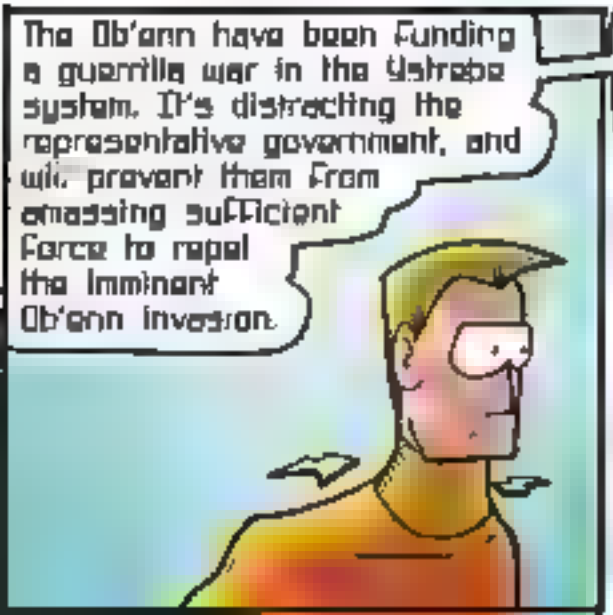
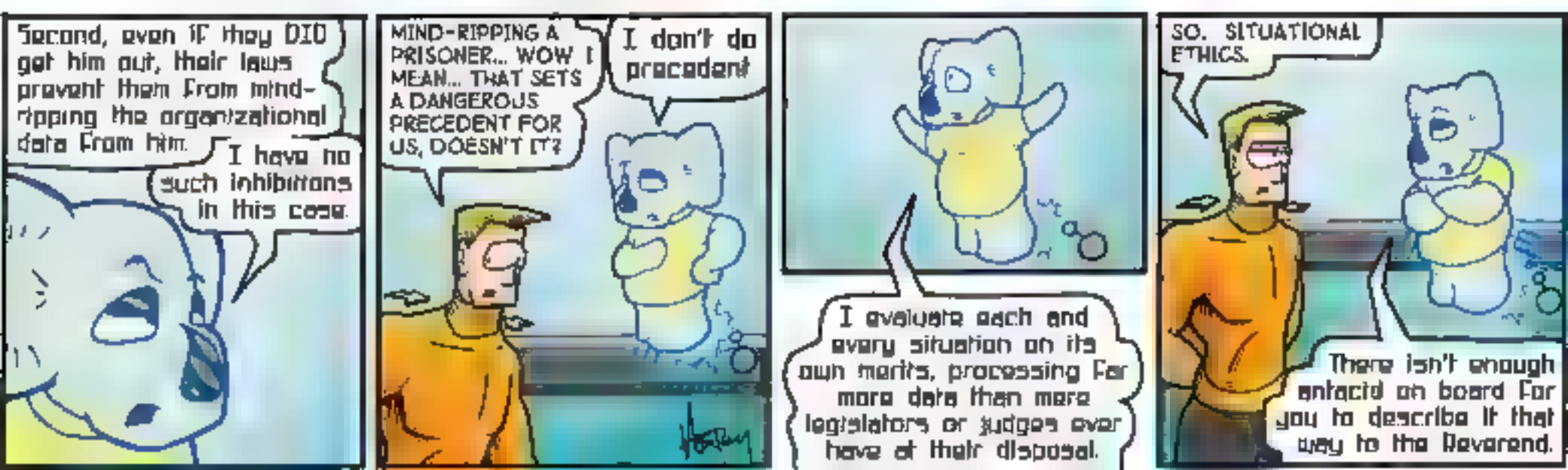


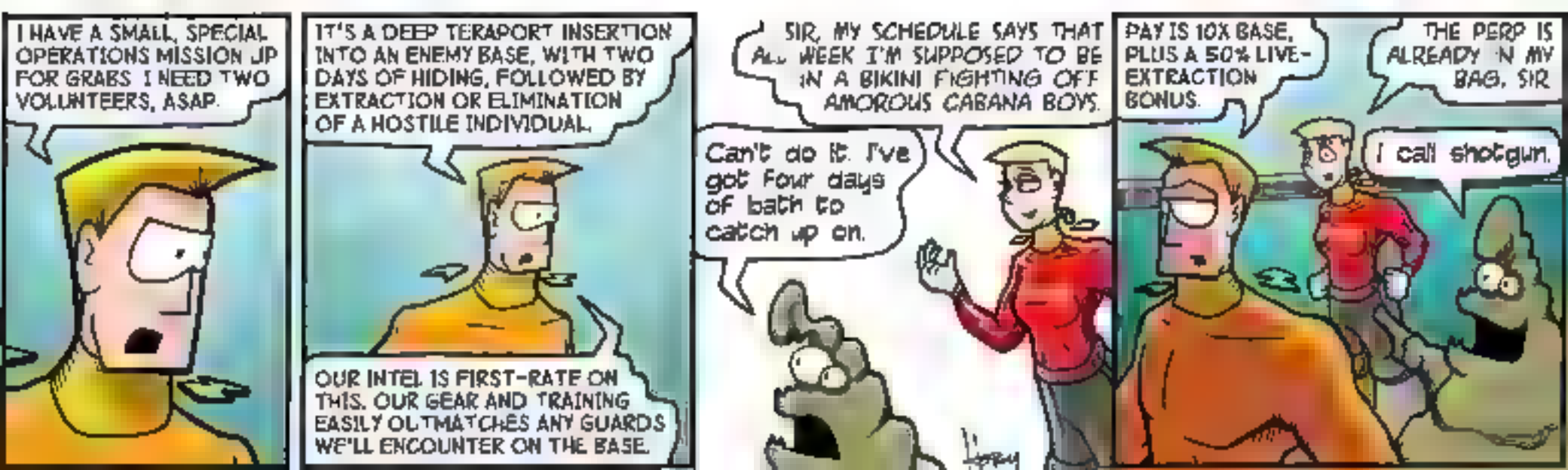

The Ob'enn have been funding a guerrilla war in the Ystrebe system. It's distracting the representative government, and will prevent them from amassing sufficient force to repel the imminent Ob'enn invasion.

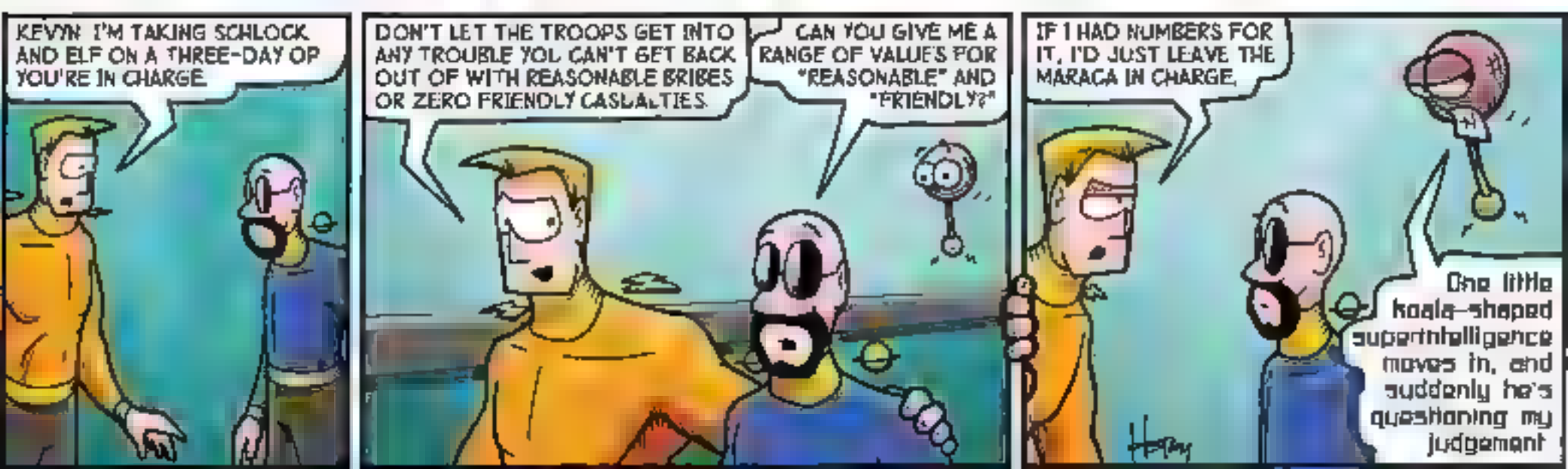
The guerrillas are divided into cells, and I've just located the one guy who can finger all the cells.

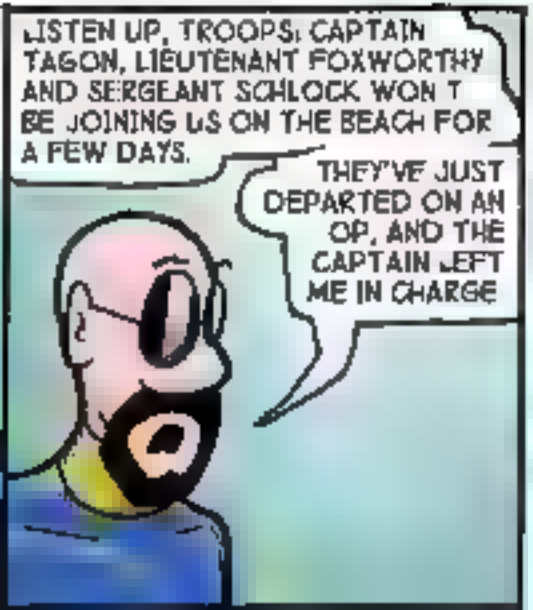
SO TELL THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHERE HE IS. THIS SOUNDS LIKE A JOB FOR A TELEPHONE, NOT A MERCENARY.
There are two reasons why that won't work.

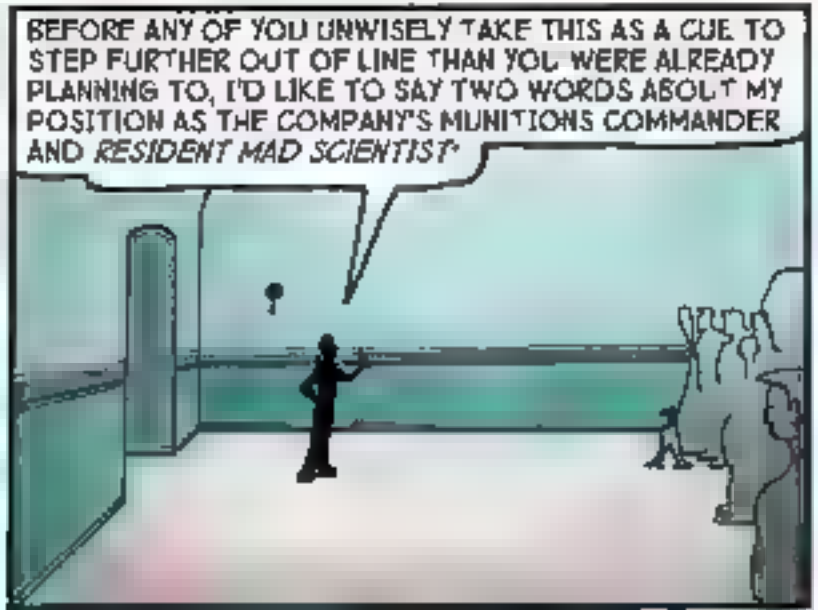
First, their government lacks the ability to penetrate the facility he's holed up in. They'd just kill him, or lose him.

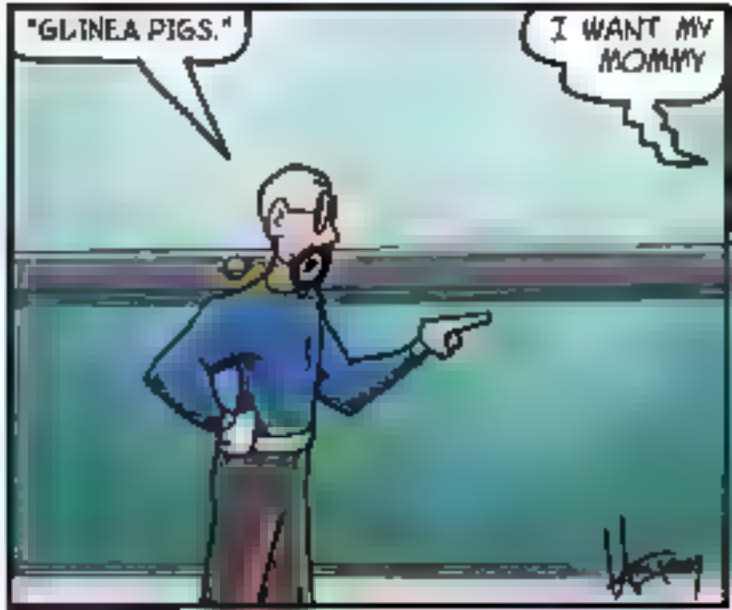

Second, even if they DID get him out, their laws prevent them from mind-ripping the organizational data from him.
I have no such inhibitions in this case.
MIND-RIPPING A PRISONER... WOW I MEAN... THAT SETS A DANGEROUS PRECEDENT FOR US, DOESN'T IT?
I don't do precedent
I evaluate each and every situation on its own merits, processing far more data than mere legislators or judges ever have at their disposal.
SO. SITUATIONAL ETHICS.
There isn't enough antacid on board for you to describe it that way to the Reverend.


I HAVE A SMALL, SPECIAL OPERATIONS MISSION UP FOR GRABS. I NEED TWO VOLUNTEERS, ASAP.
IT'S A DEEP TERAPORT INSERTION INTO AN ENEMY BASE, WITH TWO DAYS OF HIDING, FOLLOWED BY EXTRACTION OR ELIMINATION OF A HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL.
OUR INTEL IS FIRST-RATE ON THIS. OUR GEAR AND TRAINING EASILY OUTMATCHES ANY GUARDS WE'LL ENCOUNTER ON THE BASE.
SIR, MY SCHEDULE SAYS THAT ALL WEEK I'M SUPPOSED TO BE IN A BIKINI FIGHTING OFF AMOROUS CABANA BOYS.
Can't do it. I've got four days of bath to catch up on.
PAY IS 10X BASE, PLUS A 50% LIVE-EXTRACTION BONUS.
THE PERP IS ALREADY IN MY BAG, SIR.
I call shotgun.


KEVYN I'M TAKING SCHLOCK AND ELF ON A THREE-DAY OP YOU'RE IN CHARGE.
DON'T LET THE TROOPS GET INTO ANY TROUBLE YOU CAN'T GET BACK OUT OF WITH REASONABLE BRIBES OR ZERO FRIENDLY CASUALTIES.
CAN YOU GIVE ME A RANGE OF VALUES FOR "REASONABLE" AND "FRIENDLY?"
IF I HAD NUMBERS FOR IT, I'D JUST LEAVE THE MARACA IN CHARGE.
One little koala-shaped superintelligence moves in, and suddenly he's questioning my judgement


LISTEN UP, TROOPS. CAPTAIN TAGON, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY AND SERGEANT SCHLOCK WON'T BE JOINING US ON THE BEACH FOR A FEW DAYS.
THEY'VE JUST DEPARTED ON AN OP, AND THE CAPTAIN LEFT ME IN CHARGE


BEFORE ANY OF YOU UNWISELY TAKE THIS AS A CUE TO STEP FURTHER OUT OF LINE THAN YOU WERE ALREADY PLANNING TO, I'D LIKE TO SAY TWO WORDS ABOUT MY POSITION AS THE COMPANY'S MUNITIONS COMMANDER AND *RESIDENT MAD SCIENTIST*.


"GUINEA PIGS."
I WANT MY MOMMY

"Your target is 800 meters below ground in a fortified bunker. Between planetary defenses and the locals harboring the Jafa, there are three teleport-area denial fields in effect."

"I've managed to infiltrate the facility with a teleport cage, which will allow the three of you to 'port in and out safely."

A BRIGHT, BLUE BOX IN A HALLWAY. I'M GLAD OUR ONLY WAY OUT IS NICE AND INCONSPICUOUS

It looked bigger from the inside.

"Your teraport cage works fine as long as the enemy doesn't know it's there. It can mask a few 'ports, but only a few, which is why we can't send more than three of you down."

HERE'S OUR FIRST STOP SERGEANT. GET THE COVER OPEN.

"But... if the enemy figures this out and really cranks up their anti-teraport scanning, you'll only get a single 'port out of it, and then only if you're lucky."

IF WE'RE GOING TO CONVINCE ANYBODY WE CAME IN THIS WAY, YOU HAVE TO GET ALL THE WAY DIPPED IN IT

"Early misdirection is therefore the key to a safe extraction."

Travel the galaxy, meet interesting new people, and then swim in their poop.

DO NOT MAKE ME LAUGH WHEN MY FACE IS IN THIS STUFF

"The 'JoFo' is a Ystreban named Tom Phica, born into what used to be the royal House of Phica. The royals lost political power three centuries ago in the general elections, and Tom Phica wants it back."

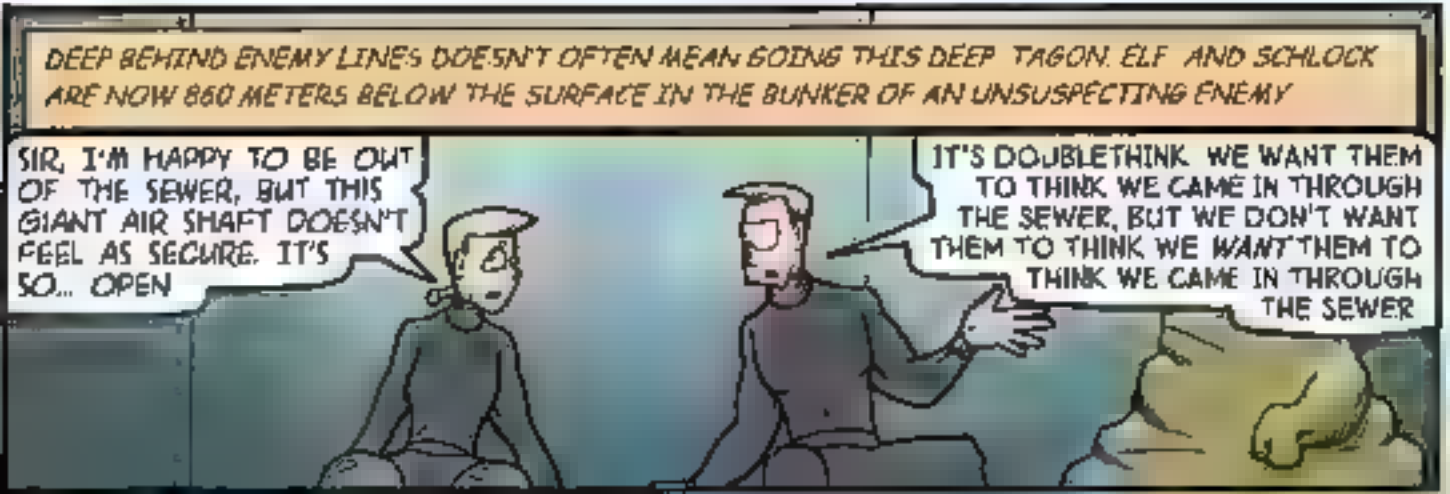
You know, this Tom guy sounds like a spoiled rich kid, grubbing for a better allowance. How dangerous can he be?

LOOK AT THE KIND OF THINGS *WE'LL* DO FOR MONEY SERGEANT

"Three hundred years might seem like a long time to hold a grudge, but it was only recently that House Phica began losing its *economic* power base."

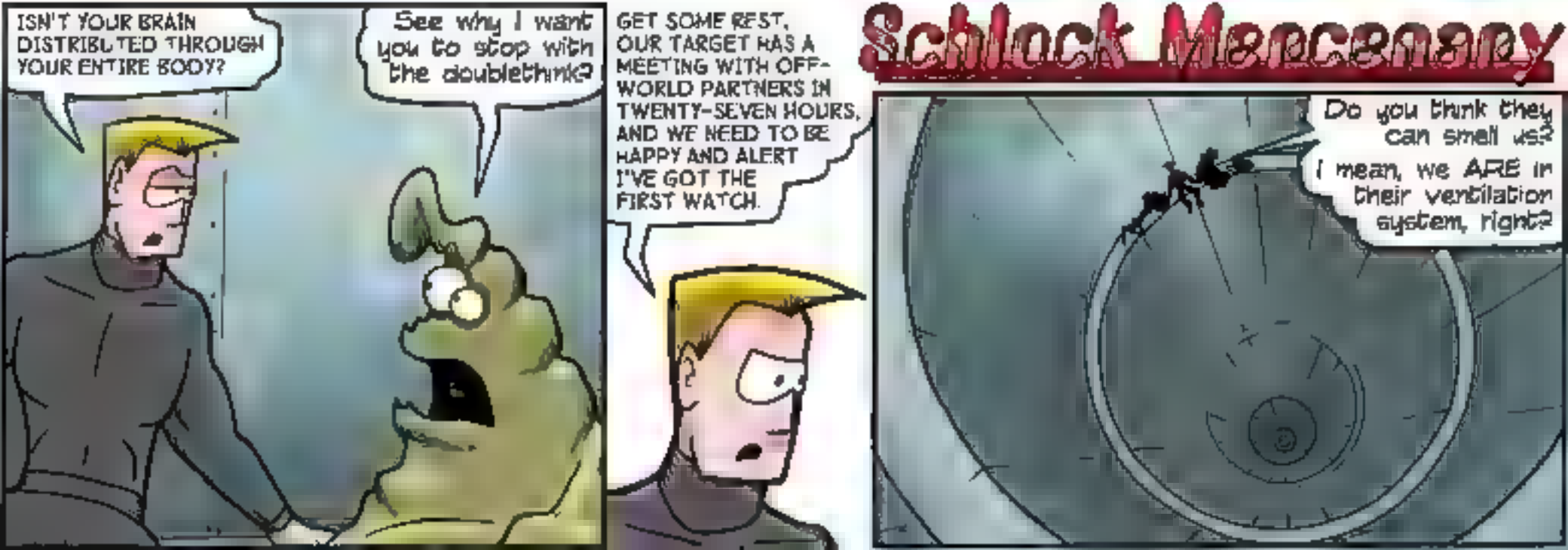
"Tom is the first generation of Phicans actually expected to WORK for a living, and he never really took to that"

The nice thing about swimming in sewage is that you guys can fart in the tub and I can't even tell


DEEP BEHIND ENEMY LINES DOESN'T OFTEN MEAN GOING THIS DEEP. TAGON, ELF AND SCHLOCK ARE NOW 860 METERS BELOW THE SURFACE IN THE BUNKER OF AN UNSUSPECTING ENEMY
SIR, I'M HAPPY TO BE OUT OF THE SEWER, BUT THIS GIANT AIR SHAFT DOESN'T FEEL AS SECURE. IT'S SO... OPEN
IT'S DOUBLETHINK. WE WANT THEM TO THINK WE CAME IN THROUGH THE SEWER, BUT WE DON'T WANT THEM TO THINK WE *WANT* THEM TO THINK WE CAME IN THROUGH THE SEWER

Ow. Stop that. It hurts my brain.

Schlock Mercenary



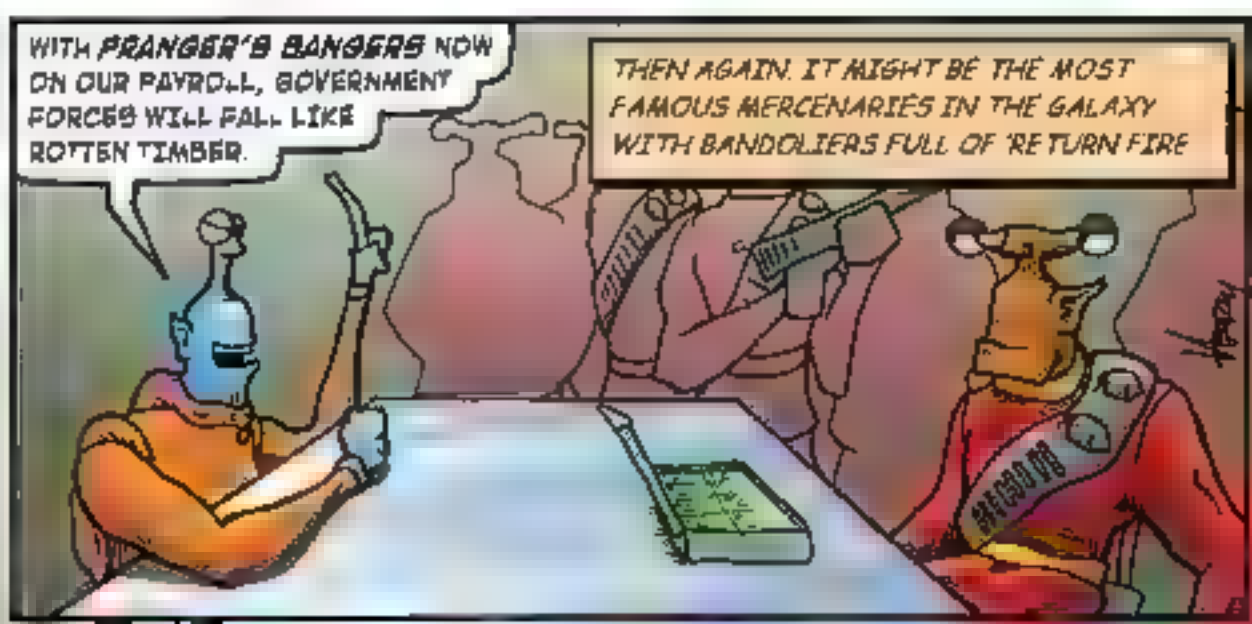
IT GETS FILTERED, AND IT'S A BIG SYSTEM. ANYTHING THEY SMELL WILL BE PRETTY FAINT

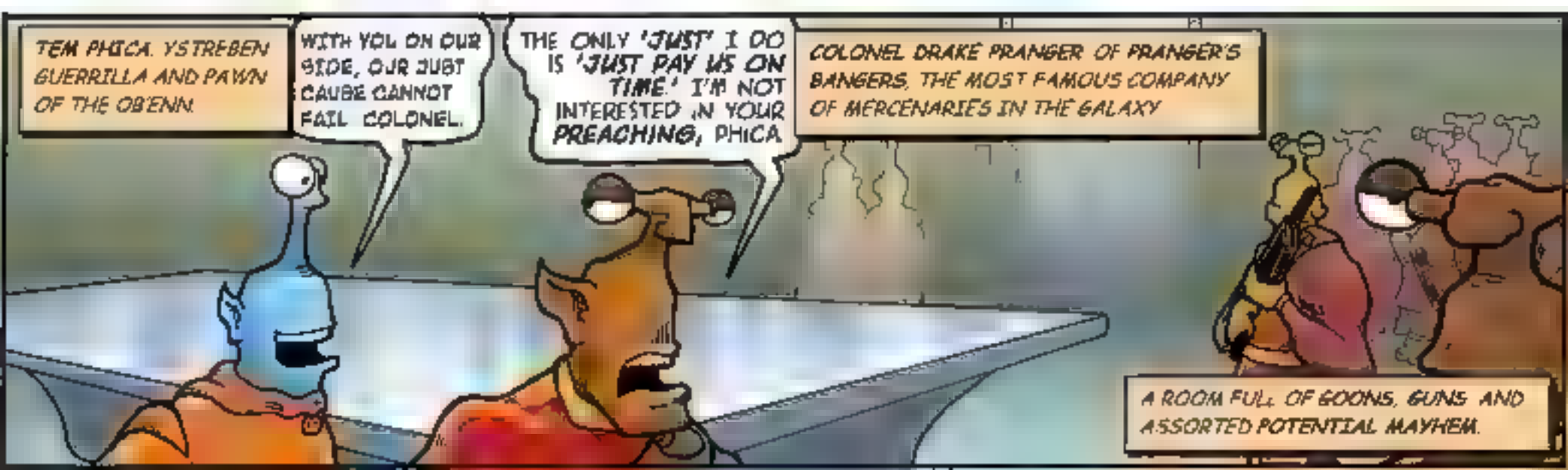
I TOLD YOU YESTERDAY, YOU HAFTA LAY OFF THAT STARCHY STUFF AT LUNCH
YOU SMELT IT, YOU DEALT IT
UGH! WHICH ONE OF YOU GASBAGS HAS BEEN PLAYING THE COLON TRUMPET?

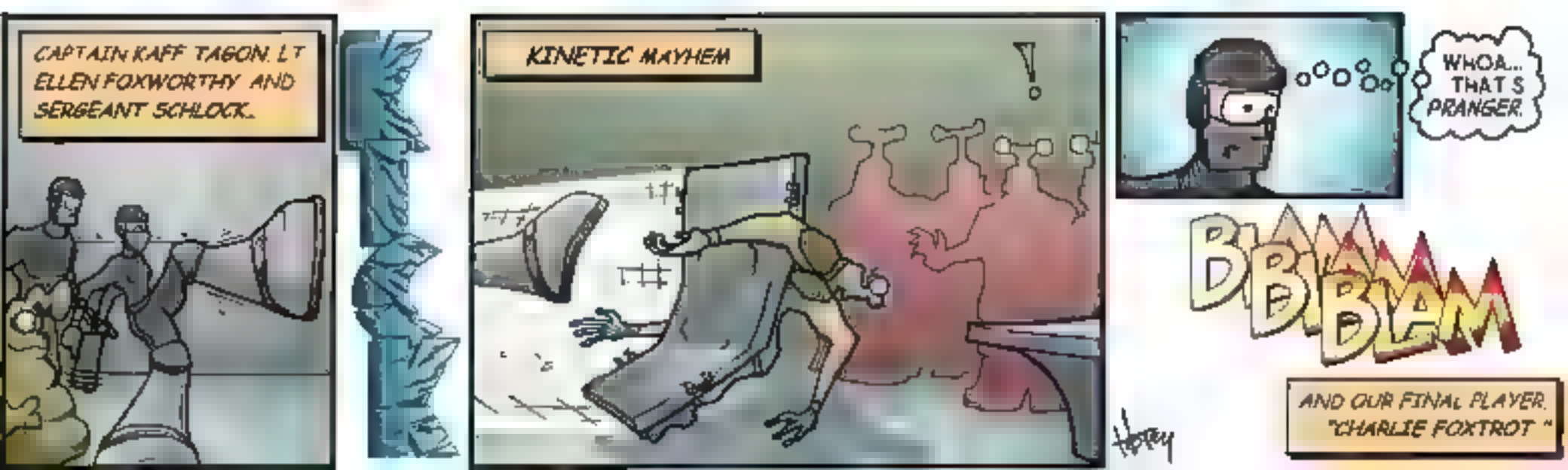
THE WAITING HAS BEEN UNEVENTFUL BUT NOT RESTFUL. FORTUNATELY IT'S NOW OVER.
PETEY'S SECURITY TAPS ARE WORKING LIKE A CHARM. I'VE FOUND OUR TARGET, AND HE'S ON HIS WAY TO THE MEETING.
THIS 'PHICA GUY IS PARANOID EVEN AT HOME. HE'S SURROUNDED BY GUARDS.
ALL OF WHOM HAVE LITTLE TRAINING, LIGHT SHELL-ARMOR AND PROPELLANT WEAPONS.
OKAY, SO HE'S SURROUNDED BY A MOVING LAYER OF ABLATIVE MEAT
Cut it out. You're makin' me hungry.

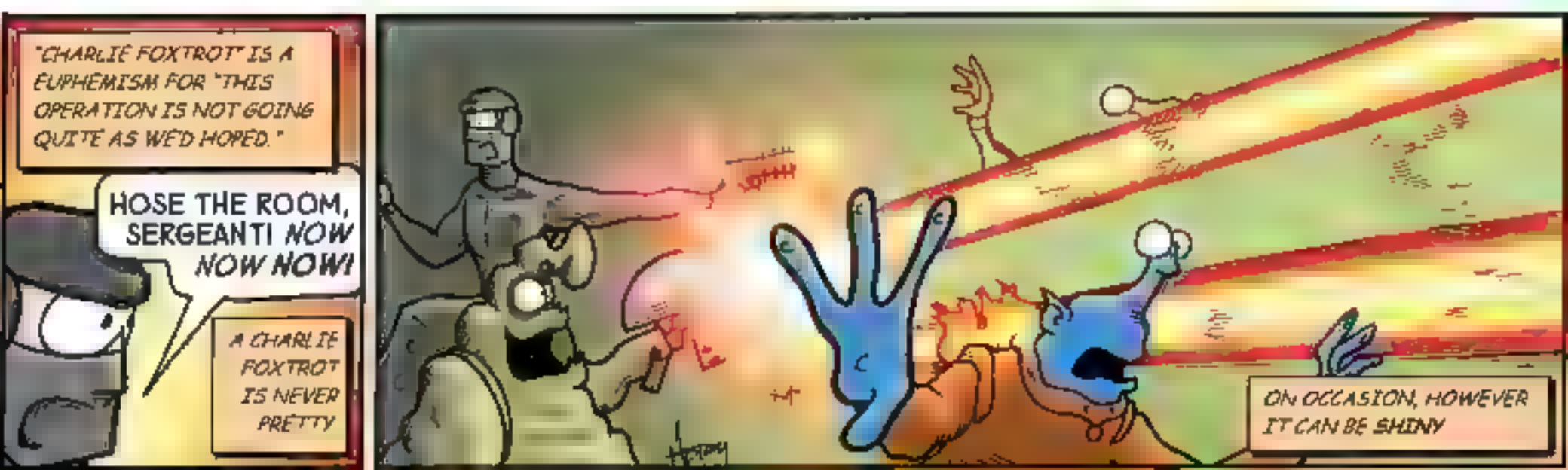
THEY'VE POSTED A PAIR OF GUARDS OUTSIDE THE DOOR TO THEIR CONFERENCE ROOM.
THE SECURITY TAPS TO THE ROOM AREN'T WORKING. IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY ISN'T TAKING CHANCES ON EAVESDROPPING.
We know that Phica went in. Just gas the guards, kick in the door, and shoot everything we're not being paid to bring back.
THAT SEEMS LIKE A PRETTY CRUDE MOD TO AN ELABORATE PLAN.
I can call it *suppressing fire* if you think it'll sound more complicated.

PETEY COULDN'T FIND OUT WHO PHICA IS MEETING WITH. ALL HE KNEW WAS THAT A LOT OF MONEY WAS CHANGING HANDS, SO IT'S PROBABLY A LOCAL POLITICO, NOBILITY WANNABE. YOU KNOW THE TYPE.
Yeah... the gonna-be-crispy type.


WITH PRANGER'S BANGERS NOW ON OUR PAYROLL, GOVERNMENT FORCES WILL FALL LIKE ROTTEN TIMBER.
THEN AGAIN. IT MIGHT BE THE MOST FAMOUS MERCENARIES IN THE GALAXY WITH BANDOLIERS FULL OF 'RE TURN FIRE


TEM PHICA. YSTREBEN GUERRILLA AND PAWN OF THE OB'ENN.
WITH YOU ON OUR SIDE, OUR JUST CAUSE CANNOT FAIL COLONEL.
THE ONLY 'JUST' I DO IS 'JUST PAY US ON TIME.' I'M NOT INTERESTED IN YOUR PREACHING, PHICA.
COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER OF PRANGER'S BANGERS, THE MOST FAMOUS COMPANY OF MERCENARIES IN THE GALAXY.
A ROOM FULL OF GOONS, GUNS AND ASSORTED POTENTIAL MAYHEM.


CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON, LT ELLEN FOXWORTHY AND SERGEANT SCHLOCK...
KINETIC MAYHEM
!
WHOA... THAT'S PRANGER.
BBBBLAM
AND OUR FINAL PLAYER, "CHARLIE FOXTROT"


"CHARLIE FOXTROT" IS A EUPHEMISM FOR "THIS OPERATION IS NOT GOING QUITE AS WE'D HOPED."
HOSE THE ROOM, SERGEANT! NOW NOW NOW!
A CHARLIE FOXTROT IS NEVER PRETTY
ON OCCASION, HOWEVER IT CAN BE SHINY

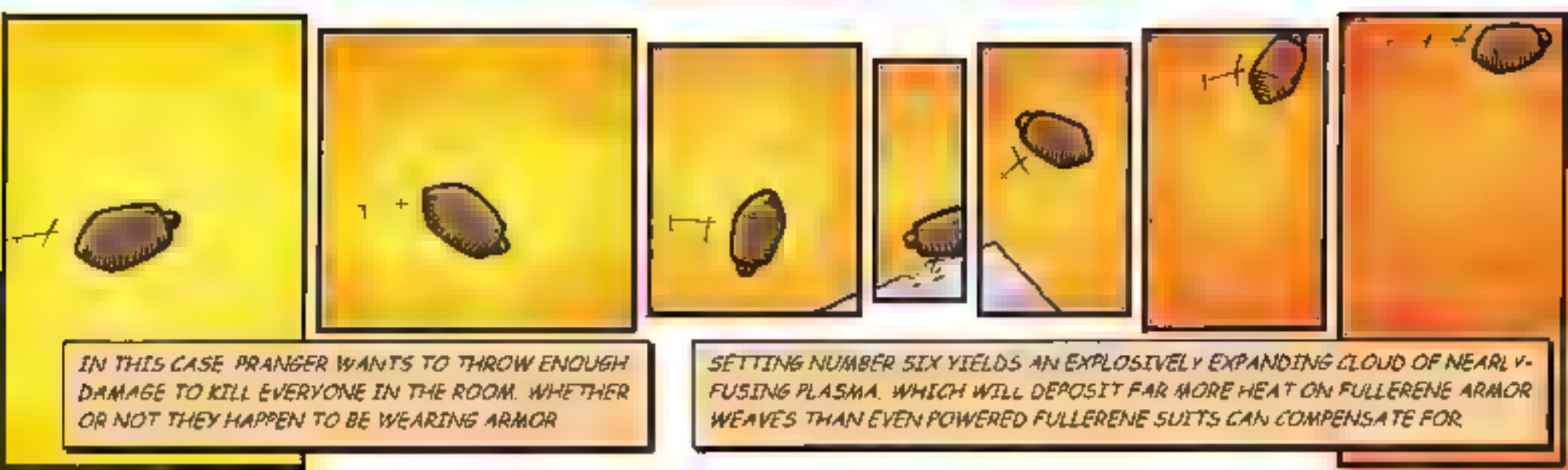
IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW GOOD A SOLDIER YOU ARE HOW FAMOUS YOUR COMMAND OR HOW MANY TIMES YOU'VE CHEATED THE REAPER YOU'VE STILL GOT TO DIE SOMETIME
THERE'S NO SHAME IN THIS ESPECIALLY NOT IF YOU'RE BEING HOSED DOWN WITH A STREAM OF HOT PROTONS IN A SURPRISE ATTACK NO THERE'S NO SHAME AT ALL
YOU'LL DIE HAPPIER THOUGH, IF YOU CAN TAKE AT LEAST ONE OF THEM WITH YOU.
IT MAY BE A STRETCH TO CALL IT "HAPPY" WHAT WITH THE AGONIZING BURNS, THE BLINDNESS, AND THE PUNGENT SMELL OF BURNT YOU BUT HEY THAT'S THE RIDE YOU SIGNED UP FOR COLONEL

COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER'S DYING ACT WAS A VIOLENT ONE. HE THUMBED A VARIABLE-GRENADE TO "6" AND LOBBED IT STRAIGHT AT SERGEANT SCHLOCK.

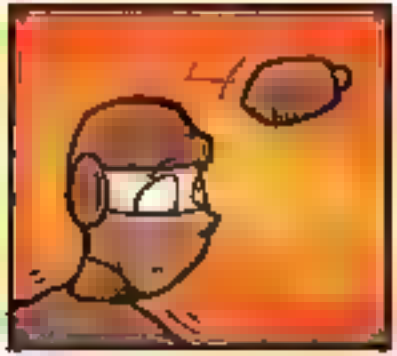
Schlock Mercenary

VARIABLE GRENADES ARE EXPENSIVE ORDNANCE. YOU PAY AS MUCH FOR JUST ONE AS YOU'D PAY FOR SIX SINGLE-PURPOSE GRENADES.

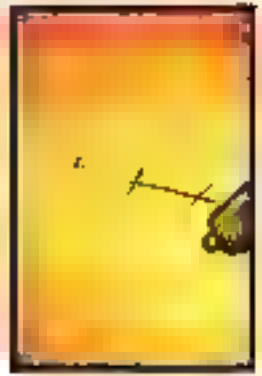
IF YOU'RE ONLY CARRYING ONE OR TWO GRENADES, THOUGH, IT'S WORTH THE MONEY TO BE ABLE TO THROW EXACTLY THE DAMAGE YOU WANT.


IN THIS CASE PRANGER WANTS TO THROW ENOUGH DAMAGE TO KILL EVERYONE IN THE ROOM. WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAPPEN TO BE WEARING ARMOR
SETTING NUMBER SIX YIELDS AN EXPLOSIVELY EXPANDING CLOUD OF NEARLY-FUSING PLASMA, WHICH WILL DEPOSIT FAR MORE HEAT ON FULLERENE ARMOR WEAVES THAN EVEN POWERED FULLERENE SUITS CAN COMPENSATE FOR.

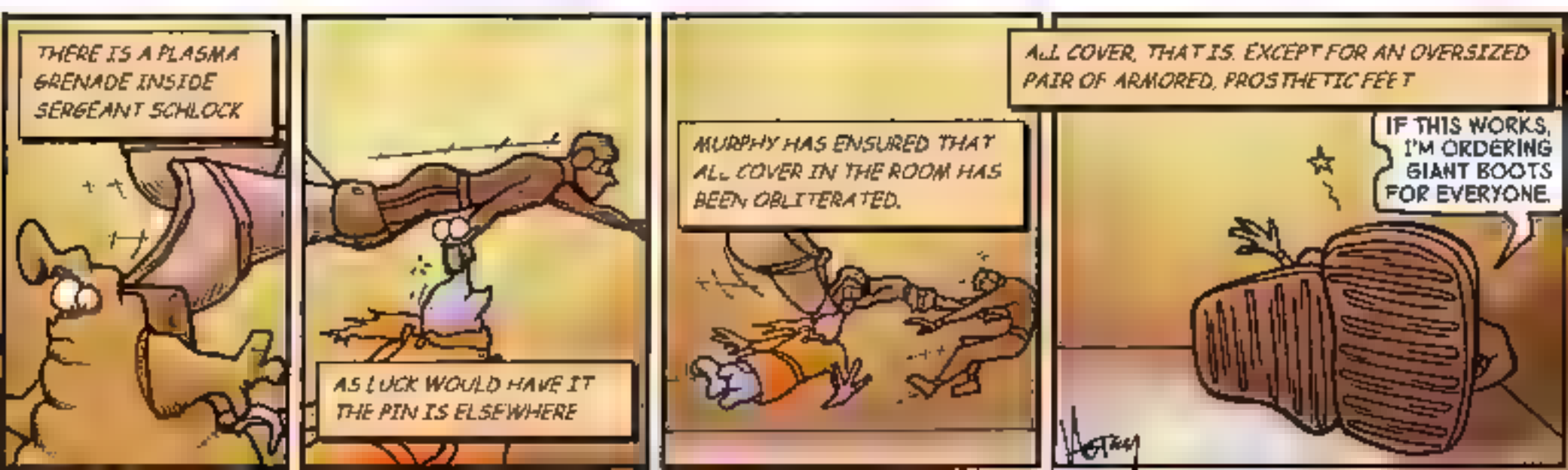
AN ARMORED MAN LIKE TAGON COULD JUMP ON IT BUT THAT WOULD ONLY RESULT IN HIM DYING A BIT SOONER THAN EVERYONE ELSE

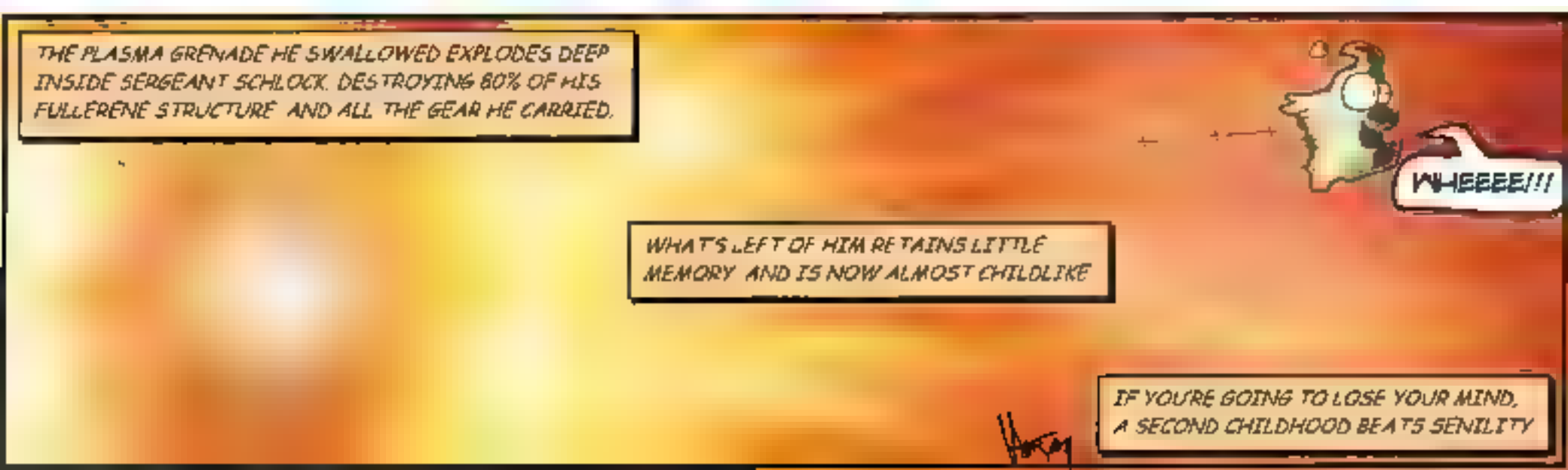

ELF SPINS IN TIME TO SEE IT PASS JUST INCHES FROM HER FACE

TAGON WATCHES IT HELPLESSLY

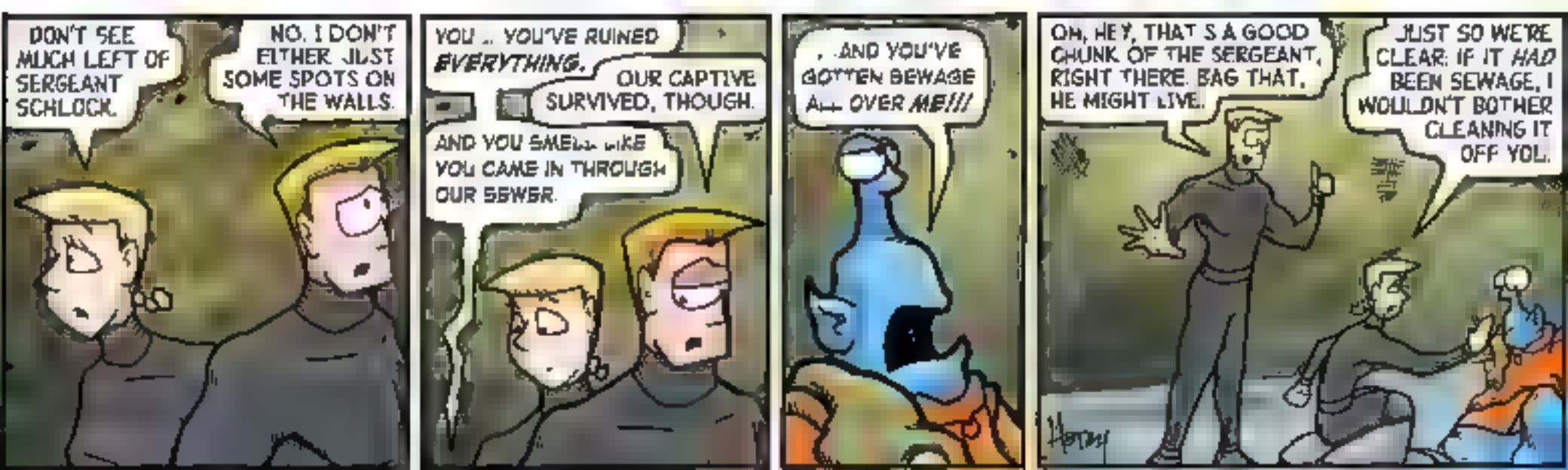


SCHLOCK EATS IT

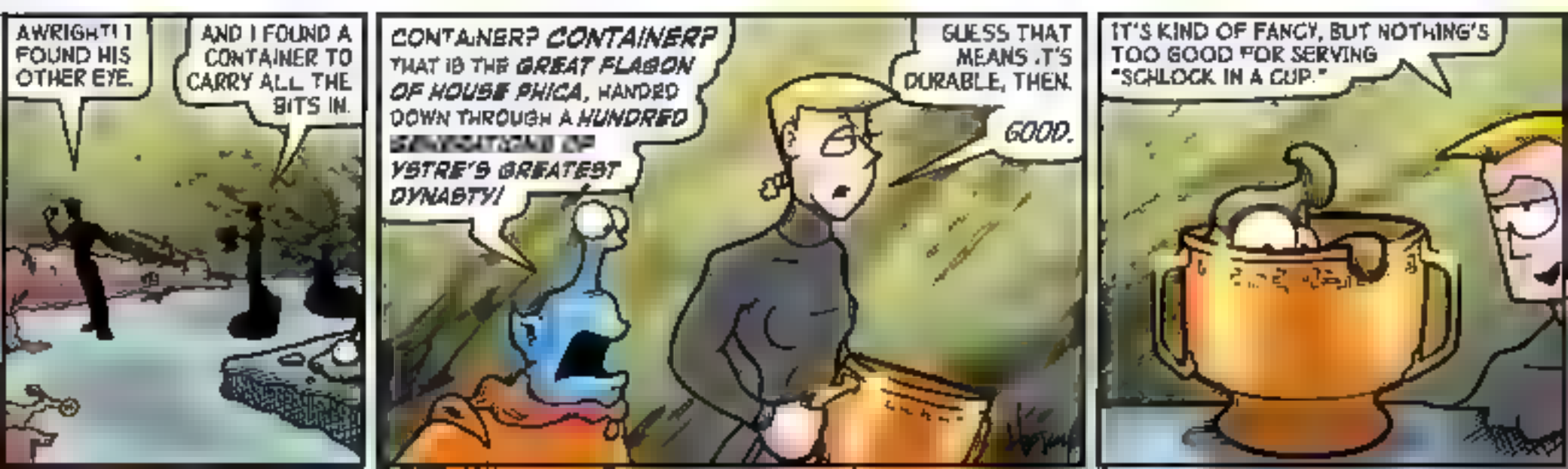

THERE IS A PLASMA GRENADE INSIDE SERGEANT SCHLOCK
AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT THE PIN IS ELSEWHERE
MURPHY HAS ENSURED THAT ALL COVER IN THE ROOM HAS BEEN OBLITERATED.
ALL COVER, THAT IS. EXCEPT FOR AN OVERSIZED PAIR OF ARMORED, PROSTHETIC FEET
IF THIS WORKS, I'M ORDERING GIANT BOOTS FOR EVERYONE.

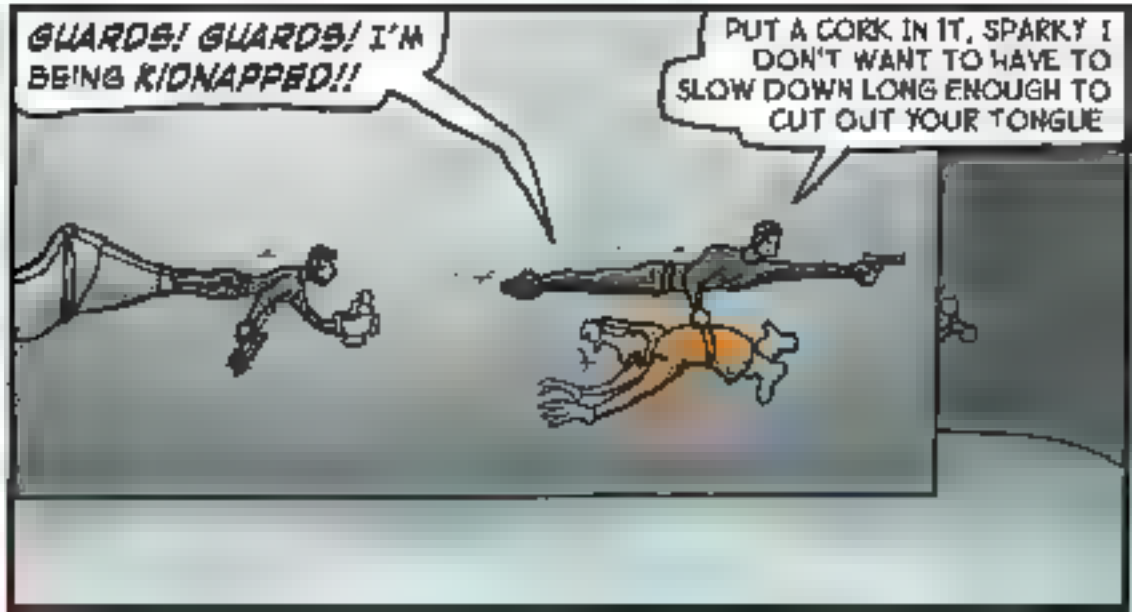

THE PLASMA GRENADE HE SWALLOWED EXPLODES DEEP INSIDE SERGEANT SCHLOCK. DESTROYING 80% OF HIS FULLERENE STRUCTURE AND ALL THE GEAR HE CARRIED.
WHEEEEE!!!
WHAT'S LEFT OF HIM RETAINS LITTLE MEMORY AND IS NOW ALMOST CHILDLIKE
IF YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE YOUR MIND, A SECOND CHILDHOOD BEATS SENILITY

YOU OKAY CAPTAIN?
FINE. MAYBE A LITTLE TOASTY
BURNS, SIR? IT SEEMED LIKE SCHLOCK ABSORBED ALMOST ALL THE HEAT
NO, NO BURNS. I JUST GOT TACKLED BY A VERY CAPABLE LIEUTENANT AND A VERY PRETTY GIRL, THAT'S ALL.
STOPPIT, SIR. YOU'RE MAKING ME BLUSH.
BLUSH. YEAH. THERE'S A SAFE WORD I'M BLUSHING.

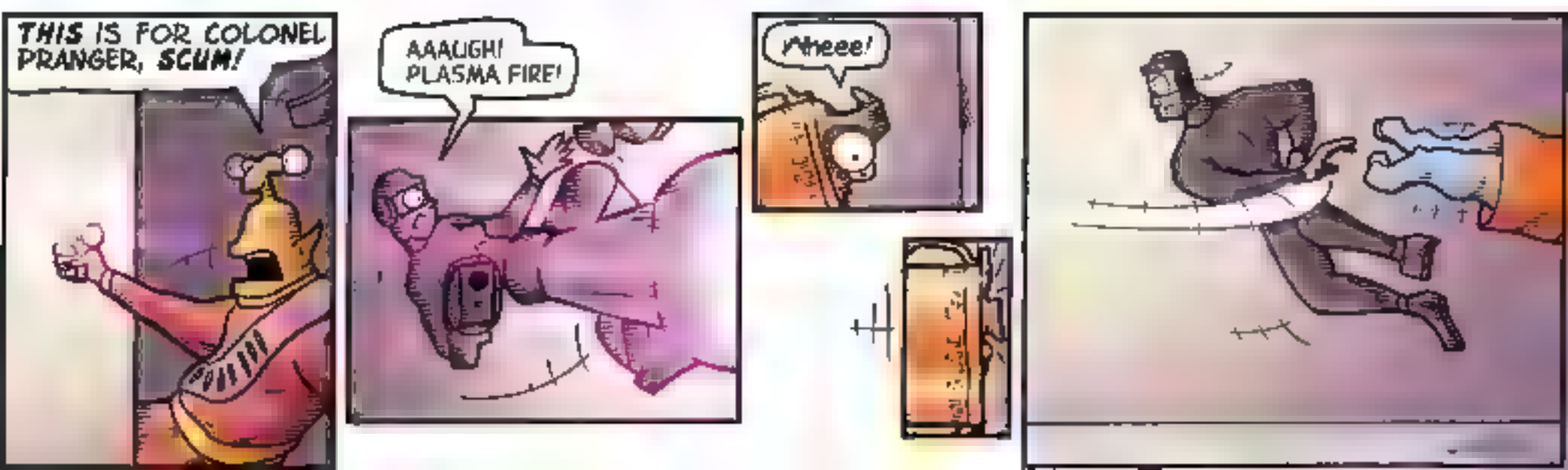

DON'T SEE MUCH LEFT OF SERGEANT SCHLOCK.
NO. I DON'T EITHER. JUST SOME SPOTS ON THE WALLS.
YOU ... YOU'VE RUINED EVERYTHING.
OUR CAPTIVE SURVIVED, THOUGH.
AND YOU SMELL LIKE YOU CAME IN THROUGH OUR SEWER.
... AND YOU'VE GOTTEN SEWAGE ALL OVER ME!!!
OH, HEY, THAT'S A GOOD CHUNK OF THE SERGEANT, RIGHT THERE. BAG THAT, HE MIGHT LIVE.
JUST SO WE'RE CLEAR: IF IT HAD BEEN SEWAGE, I WOULDN'T BOTHER CLEANING IT OFF YOU.

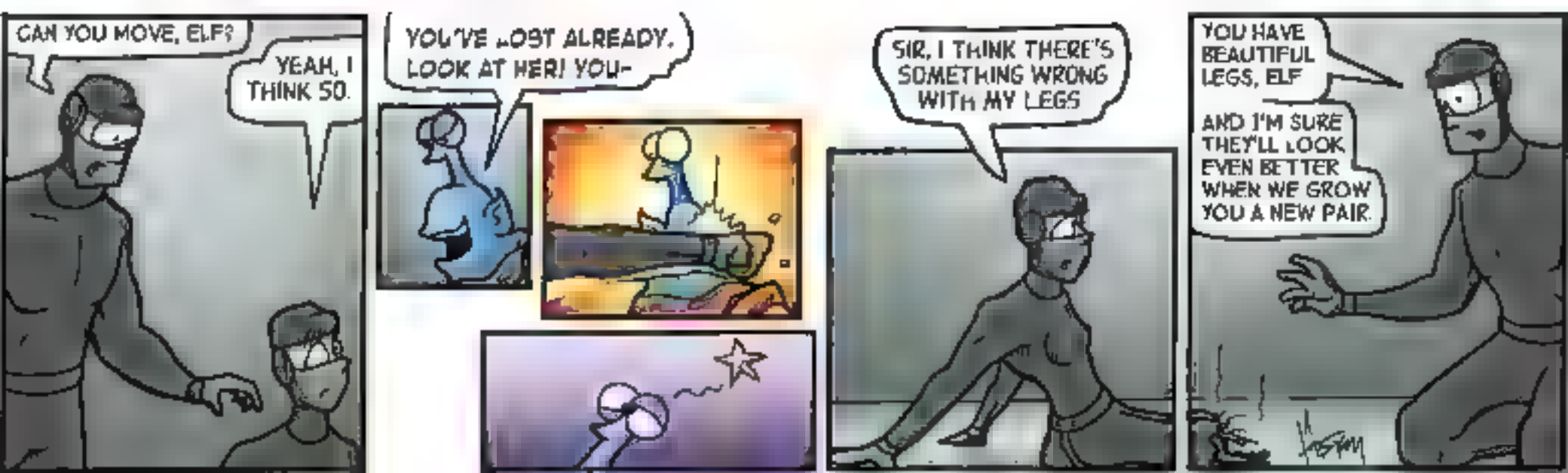
OKAY, THAT'S ALL THE BITS I COULD FIND
EVEN IF HE COMES TO. HE'S NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO KEEP UP WITH US. NOT REDUCED LIKE THAT
AND HIS GEAR IS ALL GONE, INCLUDING THE CRYOBOTTLE.
WHATEVER YOUR PLAN WAS, YOU'VE FAILED, AND YOU'LL PAY WITH YOUR LIVES
YEAH, WITHOUT THE CRYOBOTTLE, I CAN'T CUT OFF YOUR HEAD TO MAKE LIVE CAPTURE SAFE AND EASY. MAYBE I SHOULD SETTLE FOR THE "DEAD" BOUNTY. WHAT DO *YOU* THINK?

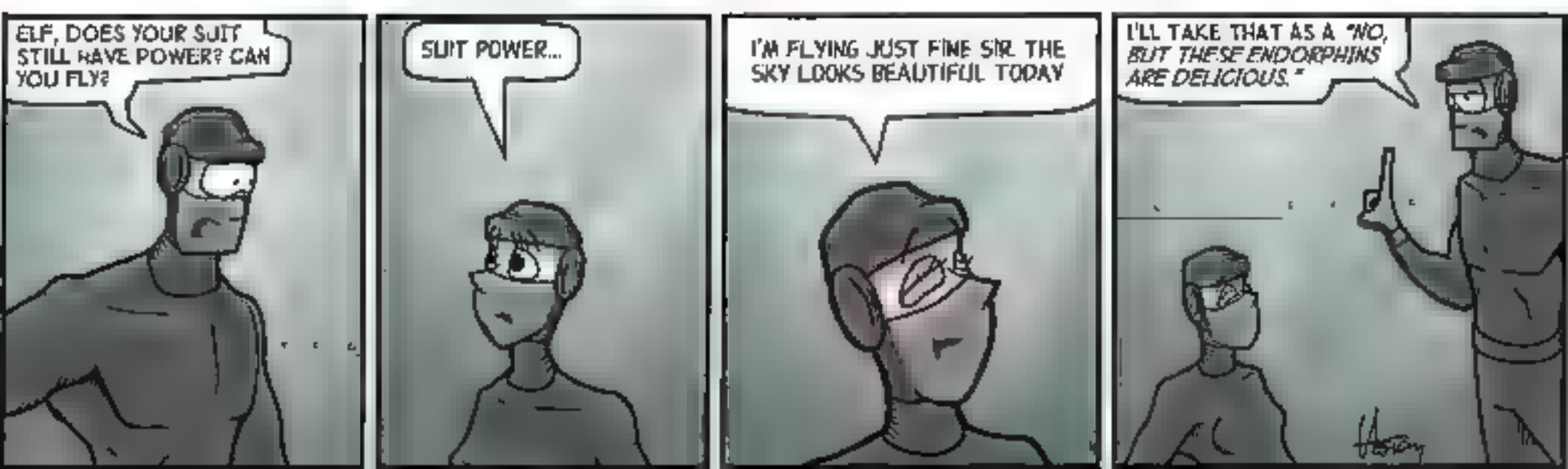

AWRIGHT! I FOUND HIS OTHER EYE.
AND I FOUND A CONTAINER TO CARRY ALL THE BITS IN.
CONTAINER? CONTAINER? THAT IS THE GREAT FLASON OF HOUSE PHICA, HANDED DOWN THROUGH A HUNDRED [redacted] OF YSTRE'S GREATEST DYNASTY!
GUESS THAT MEANS IT'S DURABLE, THEN.
GOOD.
IT'S KIND OF FANCY, BUT NOTHING'S TOO GOOD FOR SERVING "SCHLOCK IN A CUP."



Schlock Mercenary


THIS IS FOR COLONEL PRANGER, SCUM!
AAAUGH! PLASMA FIRE!
Aheee!


CAN YOU MOVE, ELF?
YEAH, I THINK SO.
YOU'VE LOST ALREADY. LOOK AT HER! YOU-
SIR, I THINK THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH MY LEGS
YOU HAVE BEAUTIFUL LEGS, ELF
AND I'M SURE THEY'LL LOOK EVEN BETTER WHEN WE GROW YOU A NEW PAIR.

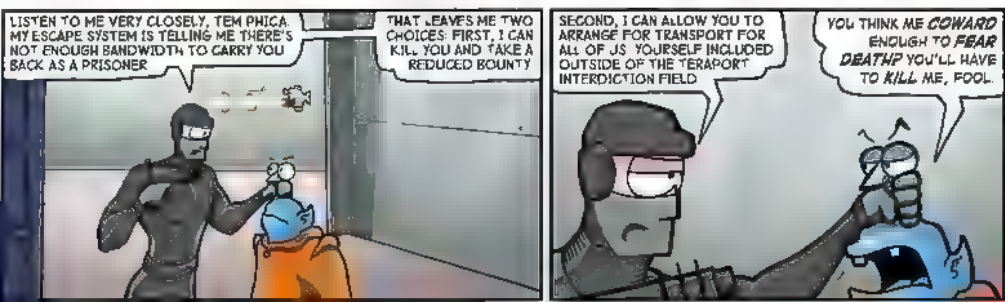

ELF, DOES YOUR SUIT STILL HAVE POWER? CAN YOU FLY?
SUIT POWER...
I'M FLYING JUST FINE SIR. THE SKY LOOKS BEAUTIFUL TODAY
I'LL TAKE THAT AS A "NO, BUT THESE ENDORPHINS ARE DELICIOUS."

ELF, SNAP OUT OF IT ! CAN'T CARRY YOU, OUR PRISONER, *AND* THE SERGEANT
MY TANK SIR, WHAT ABOUT MY *TANK?*
YOUR TANK BLEW UP BACK ON ZOOJACK ALPHA. THAT WAS *MONTHS* AGO, LIEUTENANT
AND YOU *STILL* HAVEN'T REPLACED MY LEGS? SIR, OUR HEALTHCARE *SUCKS.*
AND THAT STIMMIE I GAVE YOU MUST BE PAST ITS SELL-BY DATE.

C'MON ELF WE'VE ONLY GOT A FEW HUNDRED METERS TO GO. POP ANOTHER STIMMIE AND SNAP OUT OF IT
UNNNGH... YOU HIT ME...
THAT HU...
You keep doing that. Is it fun?
THE FUN IS GOING TO BE GETTING TO OUR EXIT WITH NO FREE HANDS FOR RETURNING FIRE.

TAGON HAS ELF UNDER ONE ARM, AND AN UNCONSCIOUS PRISONER UNDER THE OTHER. HE CAN'T RETURN FIRE
WEDGED IN THERE AS WELL IS THE FLAGON OF HOUSE PHICA. NOW: "SCHLOCK IN A CUP."
IN THE CUP WITH THE NOW-REDUCED SCHLOCK IS ELF'S RECOILLESS GAUSS-GUN.
I feel like I should be doing something.
"RECOILLESS" DOES NOT MEAN "ZERO RECOIL."
Yeee-HAH!

MADE IT. NO PROBLEM. I'LL JUST SEND THESE TWO ON AHEAD. AND THEN COLLECT SCHLOCK.
LET'S SEE. I JUST NEED TO. UH-OH.
OKAY. PLAN B.
WAKE UP. SPARKY.
HNNGH. ARE YOU GOING TO HIT ME AGAIN?
NOPE. ALL DONE HITTING.
THE WAY YOU SAY THAT DOESN'T MAKE ME FEEL ANY BETTER.


LISTEN TO ME VERY CLOSELY, TEM PHICA. MY ESCAPE SYSTEM IS TELLING ME THERE'S NOT ENOUGH BANDWIDTH TO CARRY YOU BACK AS A PRISONER
THAT LEAVES ME TWO CHOICES: FIRST, I CAN KILL YOU AND TAKE A REDUCED BOUNTY
SECOND, I CAN ALLOW YOU TO ARRANGE FOR TRANSPORT FOR ALL OF US YOURSELF INCLUDED OUTSIDE OF THE TERAPORT INTERDICTION FIELD
YOU THINK ME COWARD ENOUGH TO FEAR DEATH? YOU'LL HAVE TO KILL ME, FOOL.

OKAY, SPARKY LET'S SEE WHAT'S BEHIND DOOR NUMBER ONE.
BLAM
AAAIEEE! I'M BLIND!!
HUNH. BRAIN-PAN MUST BE BEHIND YOUR BIG MOUTH.
NO, WAIT!! I'LL...
BLAM
OKAY, I THINK I MAY BE JUST COLD BLOODED ENOUGH FOR WHAT COMES NEXT
NO PUNCHLINE? NO! THAT'S COLD BLOODED

CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON HAS DISPATCHED THE TARGET COLLECTED HIS AMNESIAC SERGEANT AND COME UP WITH A VERY SIMPLE PLAN FOR ESCAPE
ELF WAKE UP. I NEED YOU AWAKE.
CAPTAIN... DID YOU JUST KISS ME?
ELF THERE'S TOO MUCH TERAPORT DENIAL ACTIVITY GOING ON THE TERAPORT CAGE CAN'T SEND US ALL BACK.
Schlock Mercenary

I'M MOSTLY GONE. TAKE SCHLOCK AND THE PRISONER
THE PRISONER IS DEAD. THERE'S NOT ENOUGH BANDWIDTH TO SEND THE THREE OF US BACK. IT'S JUST GOING TO BE YOU AND SCHLOCK.
I NEED YOU AWAKE SO I CAN SAY GOODBYE. TELL THE TROOPS THEY'RE THE FINEST SOLDIERS I'VE EVER SERVED WITH.
ARE YOU GOING TO KISS ME AGAIN?
I WAS PLANNING ON IT.
OH, GOOD.

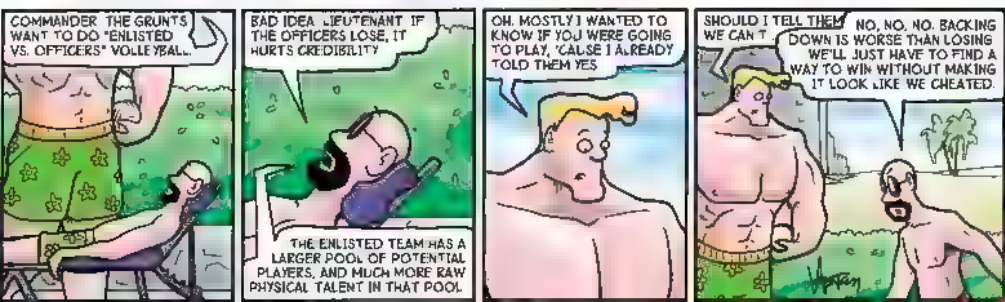
YOU GO, SIR LEAVE ME HERE. I DON'T THINK I COULD L VE WITH MYSELF, L OSING YOL NOW
I'M THE ONE WHO HAS TO STAY BECAJSE I'M THE ONE WITH THE DOROTHY WIRE IN MY BOOTS
SEE, THERE'S NOT ENOUGH BANDWIDTH TO SEND EVEN HALF OF YOU

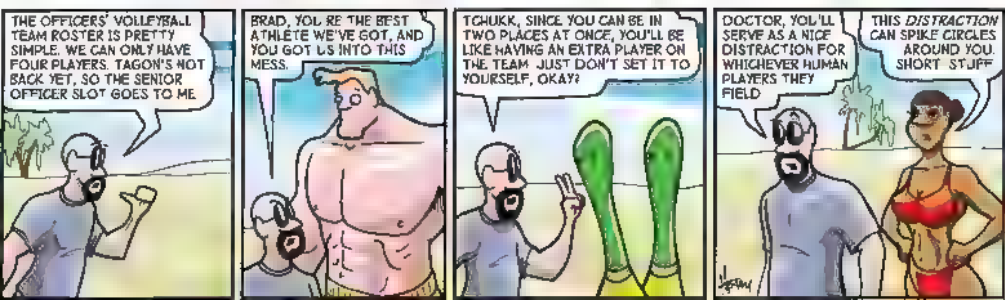
IT IS FAST. BLOODY WORK FOLLOWED BY THE PRESS OF A BUTTON. NO FANFARE. NO FURTHER FAREWELLS.
PRANGER'S BANGER'S OFFERED NO QUARTER WHEN THEY CAUGHT UP WITH TAGON. BUT HE DIDN'T ASK FOR ANY
HE TOOK SIX OF THEM DOWN BEFORE THEY CAUGHT HIM WITH A PLASMA BEAM. HE WANTED TO DIE FIGHTING. AND WHILE TECHNICALLY HE DIED BURNING HE WENT OUT LIKE HE ALWAYS HOPED HE WOULD - IN A BLAZE OF GLORY.
SCHLOCK AND ELF ARRIVED SAFELY ABOARD THE PARROT'S DEAD. FOR CERTAIN VALUES OF "SAFELY."
I didn't do it! I didn't do it!

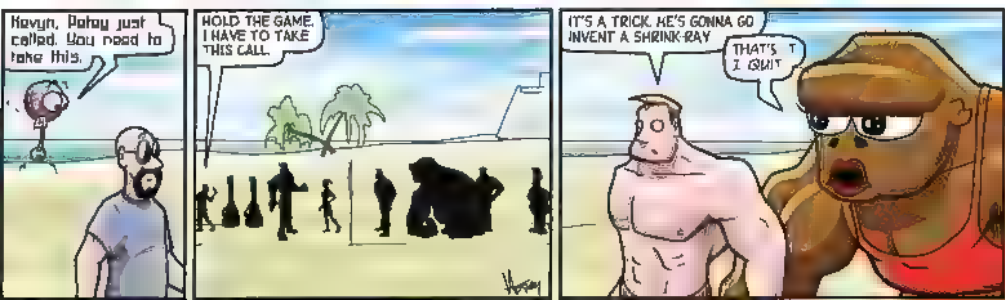
MEANWHILE, IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY (AND LONG AGO)
UNNHH
OBI-WAN, WHAT IS IT?
I FELT A GREAT DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE. AS IF THOUSANDS OF SCHLOCK MERCENARY READERS EMAILED THE AUTHOR IN ANGER, AND THEIR EMAILS WENT UNANSWERED
I FEAR SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAS HAPPENED TO A MAJOR CHARACTER
OH, IT'LL BE ALRIGHT, BEN. MAYBE HE'LL GET BROUGHT BACK AS ONE OF THOSE CREEPY, GLOWING, FORCE-GHOST THINGIES.

MEANWHILE, THERE IS A PAID COMPANY VACATION GOING DOWN.
BLIMP
SET
SPIKE
NICE ONE, LEGS, BUT I THINK YOU TOUCHED THE NET
CAN I BORROW SOME SCISSORS?

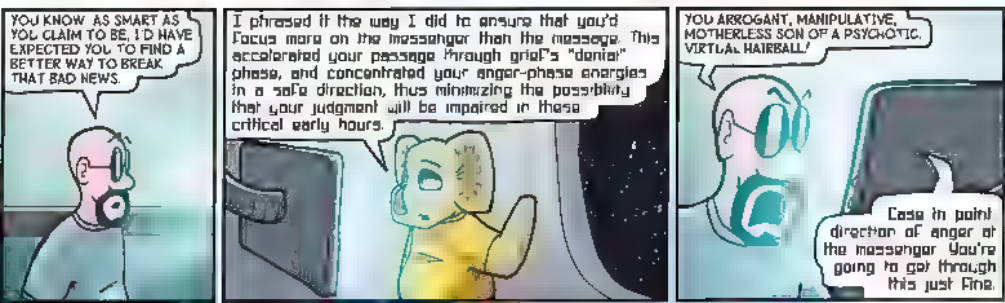
BRING IT, TWO-EYES
SPIKE
OKAY, WHERE'D IT GO? DID I SAVE IT? I CAN'T SEE...
DON'T MOVE! IT'S STILL IN PLAY!
MEDIC!

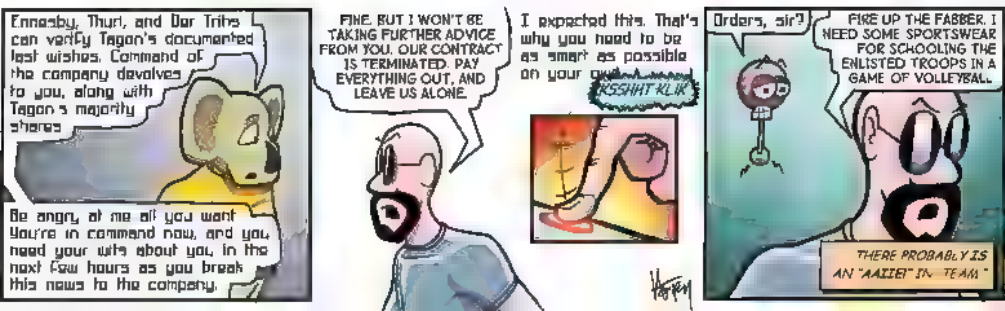

COMMANDER THE GRUNTS WANT TO DO "ENLISTED VS. OFFICERS" VOLLEYBALL.
BAD IDEA LIEUTENANT IF THE OFFICERS LOSE, IT HURTS CREDIBILITY
THE ENLISTED TEAM HAS A LARGER POOL OF POTENTIAL PLAYERS, AND MUCH MORE RAW PHYSICAL TALENT IN THAT POOL
OH. MOSTLY I WANTED TO KNOW IF YOU WERE GOING TO PLAY, 'CAUSE I ALREADY TOLD THEM YES
SHOULD I TELL THEM WE CAN'T
NO, NO, NO. BACKING DOWN IS WORSE THAN LOSING WE'LL JUST HAVE TO FIND A WAY TO WIN WITHOUT MAKING IT LOOK LIKE WE CHEATED.


THE OFFICERS' VOLLEYBALL TEAM ROSTER IS PRETTY SIMPLE. WE CAN ONLY HAVE FOUR PLAYERS. TAGON'S NOT BACK YET, SO THE SENIOR OFFICER SLOT GOES TO ME.
BRAD, YOU RE THE BEST ATHLETE WE'VE GOT, AND YOU GOT US INTO THIS MESS.
TCHUKK, SINCE YOU CAN BE IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE, YOU'LL BE LIKE HAVING AN EXTRA PLAYER ON THE TEAM. JUST DON'T SET IT TO YOURSELF, OKAY?
DOCTOR, YOU'LL SERVE AS A NICE DISTRACTION FOR WHICHEVER HUMAN PLAYERS THEY FIELD.
THIS *DISTRACTION* CAN SPIKE CIRCLES AROUND YOU. SHORT STUFF.

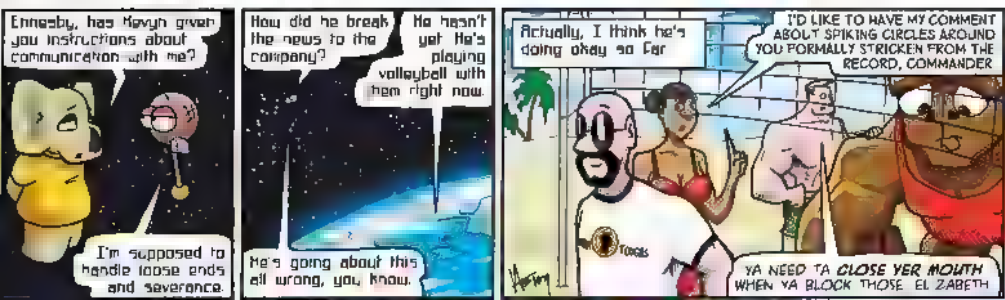

Kevyn, Baby just called. You need to take this.
HOLD THE GAME. I HAVE TO TAKE THIS CALL.
IT'S A TRICK. HE'S GONNA GO INVENT A SHRINK-RAY
THAT'S T
I QUIT

MERCENARY COMMANDER KEVYN ANDREVASN TAKES A FATEFUL CALL FROM HIS EMPLOYER
HELLO, PETEY YOU'VE INTERRUPTED VACATION TIME, JUST LIKE YOU SAID YOU WOULDN'T
WHAT BROKE?
Tagon is dead
HE'S WHAT? HE'S...
NO, I HEARD YOU I...
UNGHHH.
Schlock Mercenary

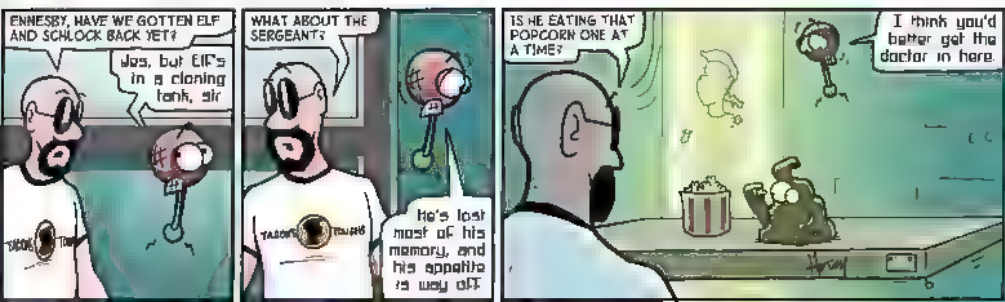

YOU KNOW AS SMART AS YOU CLAIM TO BE, I'D HAVE EXPECTED YOU TO FIND A BETTER WAY TO BREAK THAT BAD NEWS.
I phrased it the way I did to ensure that you'd focus more on the messenger than the message. This accelerated your passage through grief's "denial" phase, and concentrated your anger-phase energies in a safe direction, thus minimizing the possibility that your judgment will be impaired in these critical early hours.
YOU ARROGANT, MANIPULATIVE, MOTHERLESS SON OF A PSYCHOTIC, VIRTUAL HAIRBALL!
Case in point: director of anger at the messenger. You're going to get through this just fine.


Ennesby, Thuri, and Dor Tribs can verify Tagon's documented last wishes. Command of the company devolves to you, along with Tagon's majority shares.
Be angry, at me all you want. You're in command now, and you need your wits about you, in the next few hours as you break this news to the company.
FINE. BUT I WON'T BE TAKING FURTHER ADVICE FROM YOU. OUR CONTRACT IS TERMINATED. PAY EVERYTHING OUT, AND LEAVE US ALONE.
I expected this. That's why you need to be as smart as possible on your own.
RSSHHT KLIK
Orders, sir?
FIRE UP THE FABBER. I NEED SOME SPORTSWEAR FOR SCHOOLING THE ENLISTED TROOPS IN A GAME OF VOLLEYBALL.
THERE PROBABLY IS AN "AAIIEE!" IN TEAM.

Sir, I'm not sure how a new t-shirt will help you cheat at volleyball.
IT WON'T. I'M NOT GOING TO CHEAT.
Then why.
I AM GOING TO HAVE TAGON ON MY TEAM, THOUGH.
FAB ME A SHIRT WITH THIS ON IT
TAGON'S
TOUGHS
Captain Tagon would not have approved.
WHERE DO YOU THINK WE ARE? FLORIDA? THE DEAD GUY DOESN'T GET TO VOTE.

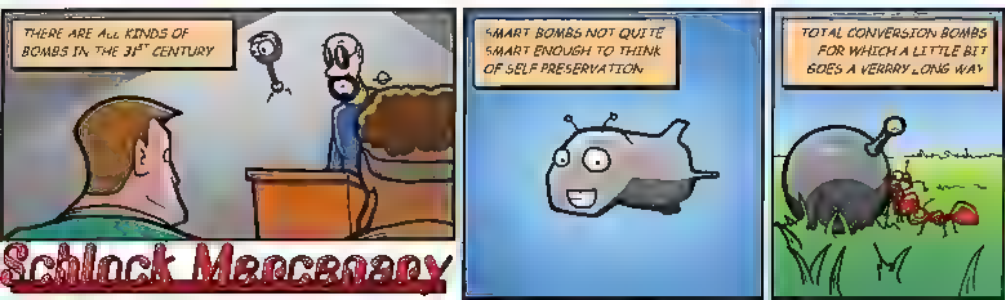

Ennesby, has Kevyn given you instructions about communication with me?
I'm supposed to handle loose ends and severance.
How did he break the news to the company?
He hasn't yet. He's playing volleyball with them right now.
He's going about this all wrong, you know.
Actually, I think he's doing okay so far
I'D LIKE TO HAVE MY COMMENT ABOUT SPIKING CIRCLES AROUND YOU FORMALLY STRICKEN FROM THE RECORD, COMMANDER
YA NEED TA CLOSE YER MOUTH WHEN YA BLOCK THOSE EL ZABETH

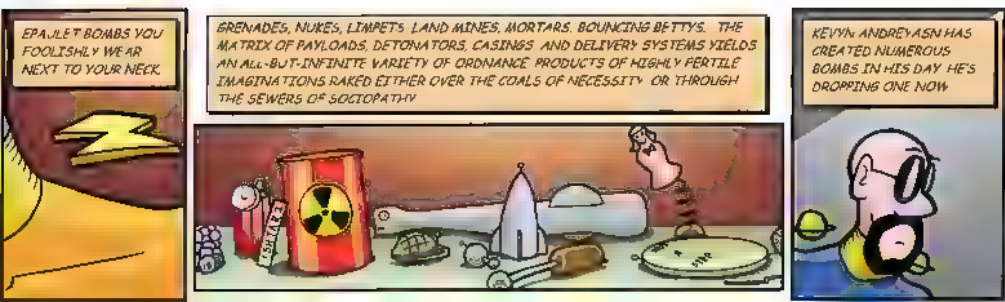
TEN ZERO SKUNK. THAT'S THE END GOOD GAME, EVERYBODY
THERE WILL BE NO REMATCH. I NEED EVERYBODY DRESSED OUT FOR AN ALL-HANDS IN TWENTY MINUTES.
COMMANDER, YOU REALLY TOOK IT UP A NOTCH BACK THERE, BUT IT'S JUST A GAME WOULDN'T IT HAVE BEEN A GOOD IDEA TO LET THEM SCORE AT LEAST A POINT OR TWO?
NO, DOCTOR. IT WOULDN'T. I'LL EXPLAIN LATER. FOR NOW, JUST MAKE SURE ELIZABETH PASSES THOSE VOLLEYBALLS WITH NO COMPLICATIONS
OH. THAT WON'T BE A PROBLEM. THE GIRL HAS A G-I TRACT LIKE A METROPOLITAN WATER TREATMENT PLANT


ENNESBY, HAVE WE GOTTEN ELF AND SCHLOCK BACK YET?
Yes, but ELF's in a cloning tank, sir
WHAT ABOUT THE SERGEANT?
He's lost most of his memory, and his appetite is way off
IS HE EATING THAT POPCORN ONE AT A TIME?
I think you'd better get the doctor in here.

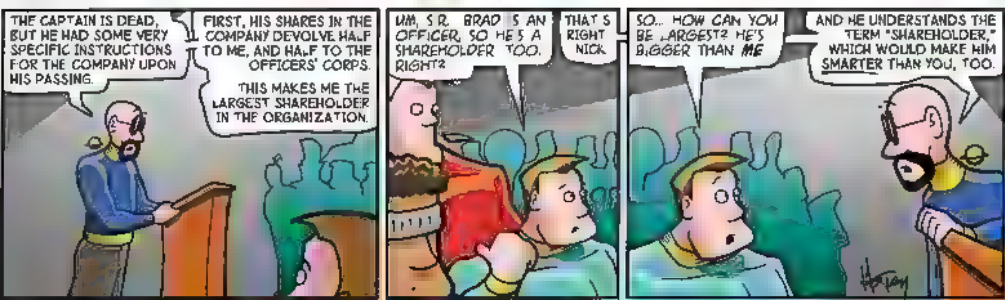
IF ELIZABETH DOESN'T NEED IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION I'VE GOT A COUPLE OF STABLE PATIENTS FOR YOU TO SEE
WHAT, HAVE THE KREELIES SEEN EATING JELLYFISH AGAIN?
NO. IT'S NOTHING LIKE THAT. ELF AND SCHLOCK ARE BACK.
WHERE'S TAGON?
HE, UM.. DOESN'T NEED MEDICAL ATTENTION.
BY THE WAY IS YOUR FIANCÉ THE REVEREND AROUND?

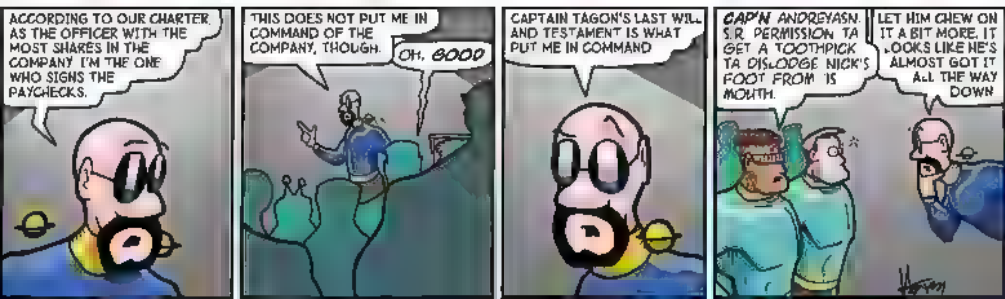
CAPTAIN TAGON IS DEAD?!?
YES. NOW FOCUS ON THE LIVING, DOC.
BUT WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THE COMPANY? THIS IS A HUGE PROBLEM!
AND IT IS MY HUGE PROBLEM. YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT OUR WOUNDED.
KEVYN, MOST OF THE COMPANY WAS INTERVIEWED BY TAGON HIMSELF. MORALE IS GOING TO BE SHOT!
SPEAKING OF "SHOT," I'D RATHER NOT HAVE TO HAVE YOU SHOT FOR NOT TAKING CARE OF ELF AND SCHLOCK, BOTH OF WHOM GOT SHOT.
BETTER LISTEN, DOC. HEADS'LL ROLL, Y'KNOW.


THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF BOMBS IN THE 31ST CENTURY
SMART BOMBS NOT QUITE SMART ENOUGH TO THINK OF SELF PRESERVATION
TOTAL CONVERSION BOMBS FOR WHICH A LITTLE BIT GOES A VERRRY LONG WAY
Schlock Mercenary


EPAULET BOMBS YOU FOOLISHLY WEAR NEXT TO YOUR NECK
GRENADES, NUKES, LIMPETS LAND MINES, MORTARS, BOUNCING BETTYS. THE MATRIX OF PAYLOADS, DETONATORS, CASINGS AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS YIELDS AN ALL-BUT-INFINITE VARIETY OF ORDNANCE PRODUCTS OF HIGHLY FERTILE IMAGINATIONS RAKED EITHER OVER THE COALS OF NECESSITY OR THROUGH THE SEWERS OF SOCIOPATHY
KEVYN ANDREYASN HAS CREATED NUMEROUS BOMBS IN HIS DAY HE'S DROPPING ONE NOW

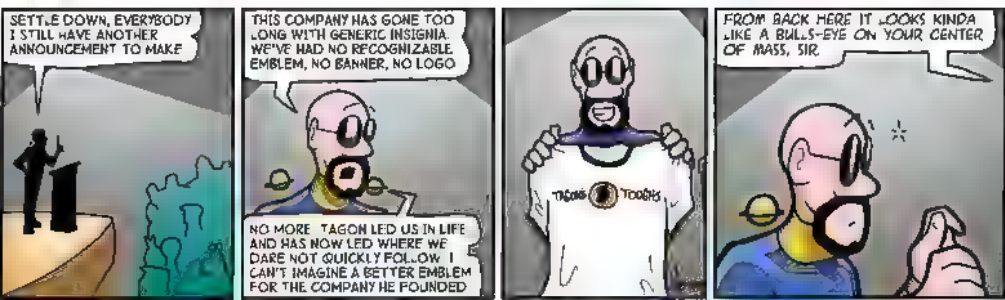
CAPTAIN TAGON WAS KILLED IN ACTION THIS MORNING.
KA—BOOM
OH THE CARNAGE

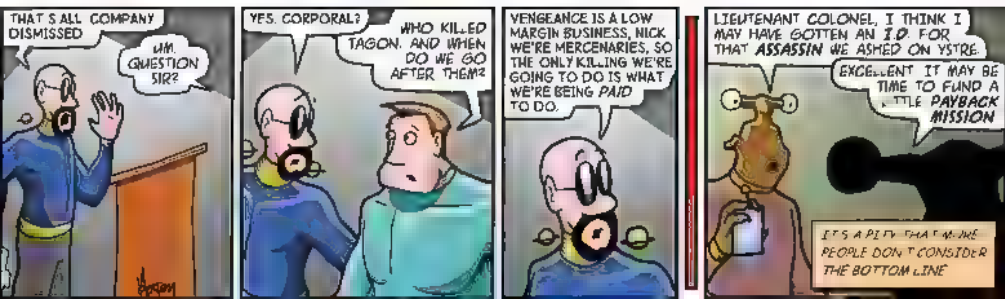

THE CAPTAIN IS DEAD, BUT HE HAD SOME VERY SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE COMPANY UPON HIS PASSING.
FIRST, HIS SHARES IN THE COMPANY DEVOLVE HALF TO ME, AND HALF TO THE OFFICERS' CORPS.
THIS MAKES ME THE LARGEST SHAREHOLDER IN THE ORGANIZATION.
UM, SIR. BRAD IS AN OFFICER, SO HE'S A SHAREHOLDER TOO. RIGHT?
THAT'S RIGHT NICK.
SO... HOW CAN YOU BE LARGEST? HE'S BIGGER THAN ME
AND HE UNDERSTANDS THE TERM "SHAREHOLDER," WHICH WOULD MAKE HIM SMARTER THAN YOU, TOO.


ACCORDING TO OUR CHARTER AS THE OFFICER WITH THE MOST SHARES IN THE COMPANY I'M THE ONE WHO SIGNS THE PAYCHECKS.
THIS DOES NOT PUT ME IN COMMAND OF THE COMPANY, THOUGH.
OH, GOOD
CAPTAIN TAGON'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT IS WHAT PUT ME IN COMMAND
CAP'N ANDREYASN. SIR PERMISSION TA GET A TOOTHPICK TA DISLODGE NICK'S FOOT FROM IS MOUTH.
LET HIM CHEW ON IT A BIT MORE. IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S ALMOST GOT IT ALL THE WAY DOWN

I'M NOT YOUR CAPTAIN, SHEP I'M A *COMMANDER*, AND THAT RANK SHOULD BE SUFFICIENT FOR ME TO LEAD THIS COMPANY IN THE COMING MONTHS.
I MOVE THAT THE OFFICERS' CORPS AND SHAREHOLDERS PROMOTE COMMANDER ANDREYASH TO THE RANK OF CAPTAIN EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
SECONDED
ALL IN FAVOR?
I TOLD YOU TO LET *ME* HANDLE THE COMPANY STUFF DOC
IF YOU DON'T RAISE YOUR HAND FOR YOURSELF *RIGHT NOW* COMMANDER, I'LL HAVE IT AMPUTATED AND INSERTED ELSEWHERE

MASSEY, PERHAPS YOU SHOULD GET THE CHARTER UPDATED WITH CAPTAIN ANDREYASN'S NEW TITLE
ENNESBY, I THINK YOU SHOULD FAB OUR CAPTAIN A NEW UNIFORM WITH SOME CAPTAIN'S EPAULETS TO GO WITH IT
WE'LL EVEN GET A GRENADE IN ONE OF THEM FOR YOU, SIR!
AM I SUPPOSED TO THANK YOU FOR THAT? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THESE BABIES ARE LOADED WITH?


SETTLE DOWN, EVERYBODY I STILL HAVE ANOTHER ANNOUNCEMENT TO MAKE
THIS COMPANY HAS GONE TOO LONG WITH GENERIC INSIGNIA. WE'VE HAD NO RECOGNIZABLE EMBLEM, NO BANNER, NO LOGO
NO MORE TAGON LED US IN LIFE AND HAS NOW LED WHERE WE DARE NOT QUICKLY FOLLOW I CAN'T IMAGINE A BETTER EMBLEM FOR THE COMPANY HE FOUNDED
TAGON TOOGIES
FROM BACK HERE IT LOOKS KINDA LIKE A BULLS-EYE ON YOUR CENTER OF MASS, SIR.

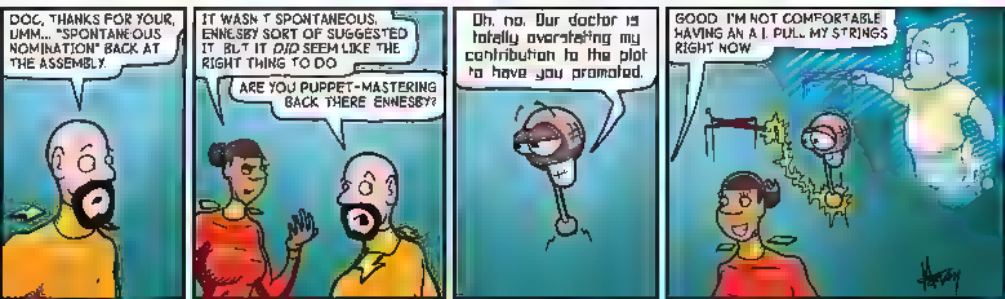

THAT'S ALL. COMPANY DISMISSED
UM. QUESTION SIR?
YES, CORPORAL?
WHO KILLED TAGON. AND WHEN DO WE GO AFTER THEM?
VENGEANCE IS A LOW MARGIN BUSINESS, NICK. WE'RE MERCENARIES, SO THE ONLY KILLING WE'RE GOING TO DO IS WHAT WE'RE BEING PAID TO DO.
LIEUTENANT COLONEL, I THINK I MAY HAVE GOTTEN AN I.D. FOR THAT ASSASSIN WE ASKED ON YSTRE.
EXCELLENT. IT MAY BE TIME TO FUND A LITTLE PAYBACK MISSION
IT'S A PITY THAT MORE PEOPLE DON'T CONSIDER THE BOTTOM LINE

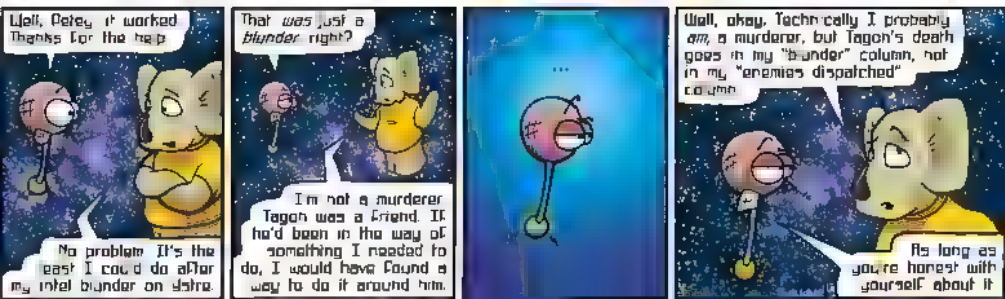
THE NEWLY-PROMOTED MERCENARY CAPTAIN KEVYN ANDREYASN GETS A MANDATED MAKEOVER
YOU LOOK GOOD IN IT KEVYN.
GRANTED, ORANGE IS A HARSH COLOR ON YOU, AS IT BRINGS OUT THE GLARE OFF YOUR NOBLE DOME. BUT THAT'S JUST MY FASHION TRAINING KICKING IN.
NOW THERE'S A DISCIPLINE I WOULD HAVE BEEN PLEASED TO CONTINUE IN IGNORANCE OF

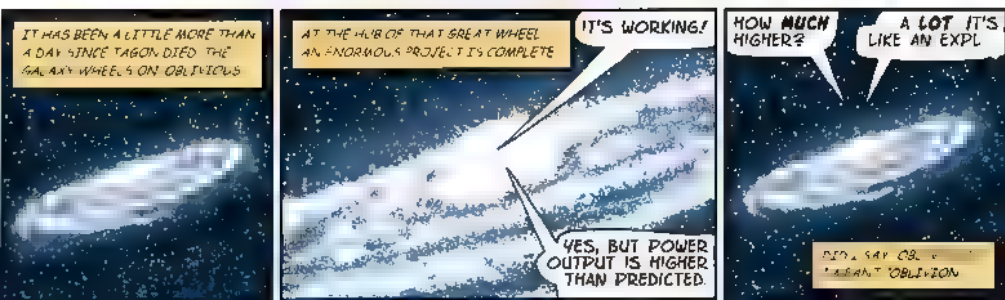
WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE GLASSES, THOUGH.
THEY STAY I CAN'T SEE A THING WITHOUT THEM.
Schlock Mercenary
PETEY PAID US WITH SOME GOOD GEAR I CAN BRING YOUR NATURAL EYESIGHT RIGHT UP TO SPEC
I MISSPOKE THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH MY NATURAL EYESIGHT
I SHOULD HAVE SAID "I CAN'T SEE A THING OUTSIDE THE VISIBLE SPECTRUM WITHOUT THEM."

YOU ALSO CAN'T HIDE BEHIND THEM ANYMORE. THE COMPANY NEEDS TO KNOW YOU'RE THERE MORE THAN YOU NEED TO BE ABLE TO SEE IN INFRARED
WHAT ABOUT ULTRAVIOLET, MICROWAVE AND X-RAY?
YOU GET ALL THAT FROM THOSE?
WAIT... YOU HAVE X-RAY VISION?
I CAN SEE THAT YOUR SKIN TEMPERATURE JUST WENT UP IN PATTERNS TYPICAL OF BOTH EMBARRASSMENT AND ANGER, BUT I USED INFRARED FOR THAT
ONE WORD ABOUT "GREAT BONE STRUCTURE" AND YOU'LL NEED SURGERY

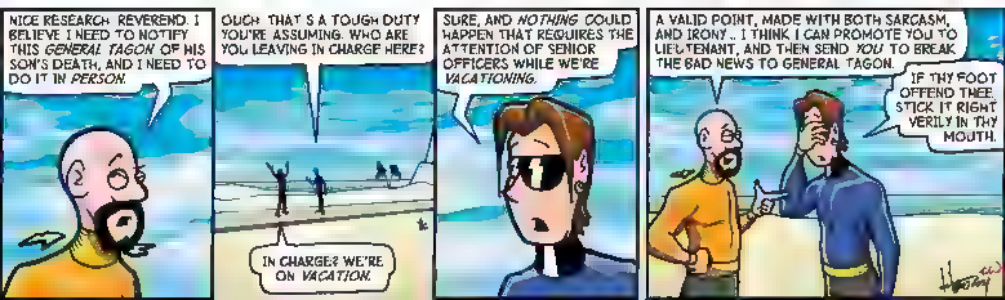
OKAY, THE GLASSES ARE STOWED. HOW DO I LOOK?
YOU HAVE EYES! THEY'RE A LITTLE ON THE BEADY SIDE, THOUGH. CAN YOU DO "PENETRATING STARE" WITH THEM?
NO, THAT'S MORE OF A "LEVEL UNAMUSED GAZE."
OOOH, ANGRY EYES. NICE CHANGE-UP
Maybe that should be al for today, Doc

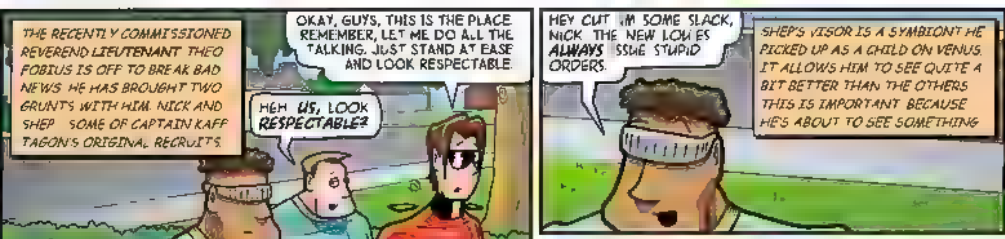

DOC, THANKS FOR YOUR, UMM... "SPONTANEOUS NOMINATION" BACK AT THE ASSEMBLY.
IT WASN'T SPONTANEOUS. ENNESBY SORT OF SUGGESTED IT, BUT IT DID SEEM LIKE THE RIGHT THING TO DO
ARE YOU PUPPET-MASTERING BACK THERE ENNESBY?
Oh, no. Our doctor is totally overstating my contribution to the plot to have you promoted.
GOOD. I'M NOT COMFORTABLE HAVING AN A.I. PULL MY STRINGS RIGHT NOW.


Well, Petey, it worked. Thanks for the help.
No problem. It's the least I could do after my intel blunder on Ystra.
That *was* just a *blunder*, right?
I'm not a murderer. Tagon was a friend. If he'd been in the way of something I needed to do, I would have found a way to do it around him.
...
Well, okay. Technically I probably *am* a murderer, but Tagon's death goes in my "blunder" column, not in my "enemies dispatched" column.
As long as you're honest with yourself about it.

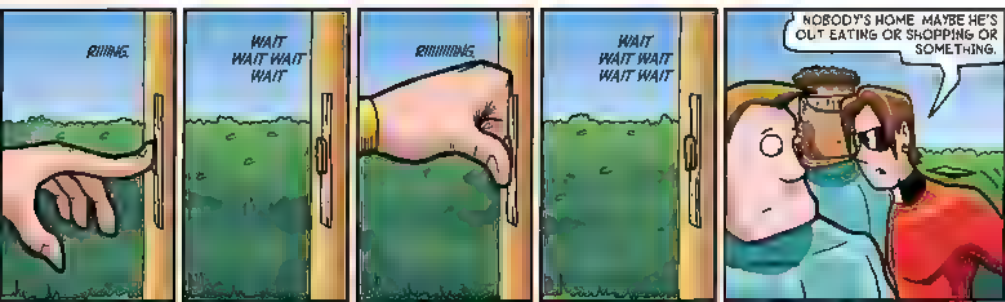

IT HAS BEEN A LITTLE MORE THAN A DAY SINCE TAGON DIED. THE GALAXY WHEEL IS ON OBLIVIOUS
AT THE HUB OF THAT GREAT WHEEL AN ENORMOUS PROJECT IS COMPLETE
IT'S WORKING!
YES, BUT POWER OUTPUT IS HIGHER THAN PREDICTED.
HOW MUCH HIGHER?
A LOT. IT'S LIKE AN EXPL
OBLIVION

REVEREND, YOU'RE GOING TO RUN CAPTAIN TAGON'S FUNERAL HOW SOON CAN YOU BE READY?
THAT DEPENDS... HOW SOON CAN THE NEXT-OF-KIN BE HERE?
I DIDN'T SEE ANY LISTED IN HIS WILL
I DUG AROUND A LITTLE ON THE HYPERNET HIS FATHER IS STILL ALIVE RETIRED ON CELESCHUL
I WONDER WHY THE CAPTAIN DIDN'T LIST HIM.
MAYBE GENERAL KARL TAGON AND HIS SON THE MERCENARY DIDN'T GET ALONG.

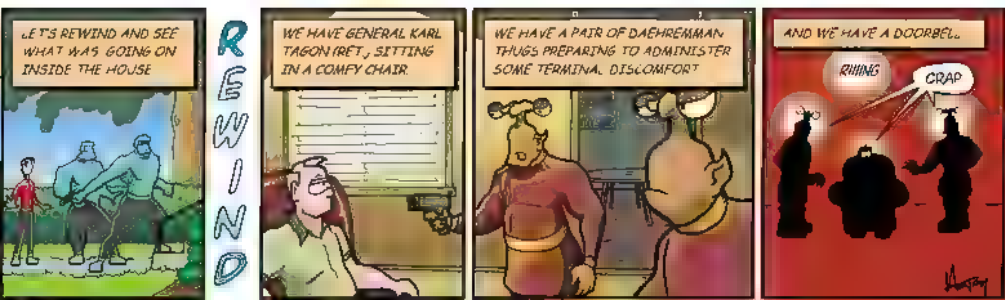

NICE RESEARCH REVEREND. I BELIEVE I NEED TO NOTIFY THIS *GENERAL TAGON* OF HIS SON'S DEATH, AND I NEED TO DO IT IN *PERSON*.
OUCH. THAT'S A TOUGH DUTY YOU'RE ASSUMING. WHO ARE YOU LEAVING IN CHARGE HERE?
IN CHARGE? WE'RE ON *VACATION*.
SURE, AND *NOTHING* COULD HAPPEN THAT REQUIRES THE ATTENTION OF SENIOR OFFICERS WHILE WE'RE *VACATIONING*.
A VALID POINT, MADE WITH BOTH SARCASM, AND IRONY.. I THINK I CAN PROMOTE YOU TO LIEUTENANT, AND THEN SEND *YOU* TO BREAK THE BAD NEWS TO GENERAL TAGON.
IF THY FOOT OFFEND THEE, STICK IT RIGHT VERILY IN THY MOUTH.



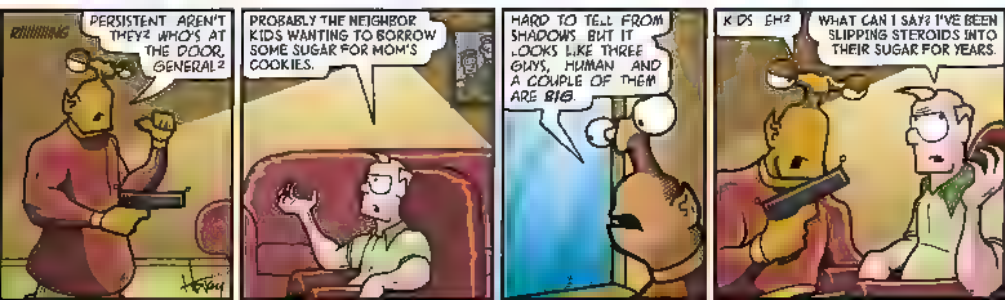
Schlock Mercenary


RIIIING.
WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT
RIIIIIIING.
WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT
NOBODY'S HOME. MAYBE HE'S OUT EATING OR SHOPPING OR SOMETHING.

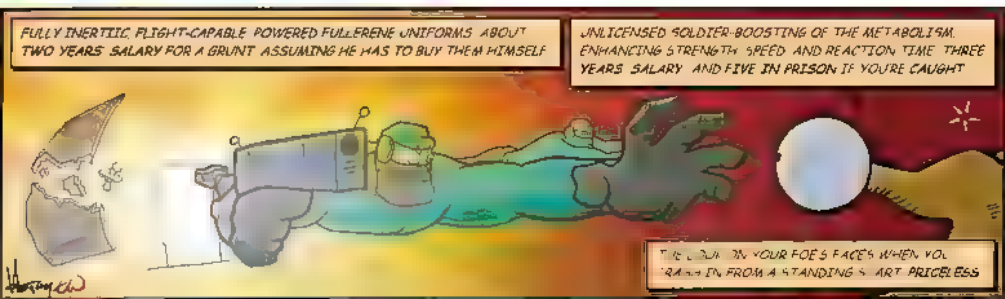
THE RUDE ACTIONS OF NICK AND SHEP (AS WELL AS THE RESPONSE FROM THEIR NEWBIE REVEREND LOUIE) WILL HAVE TO WAIT. BE PATIENT. CHURLISH IMPATIENCE WOULD BE RUDE.

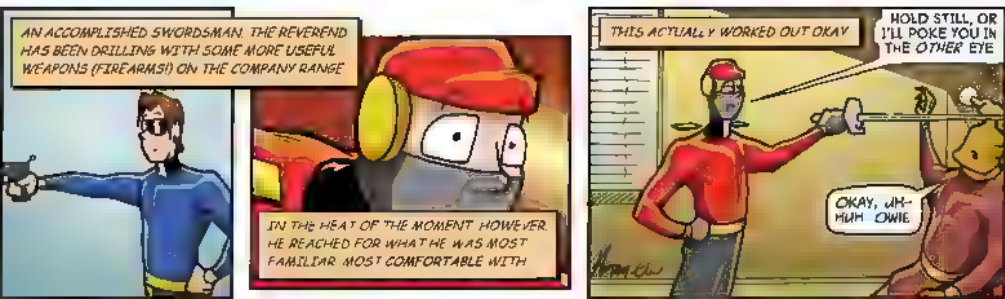

LET'S REWIND AND SEE WHAT WAS GOING ON INSIDE THE HOUSE
REWIND
WE HAVE GENERAL KARL TAGON (RET.) SITTING IN A COMFY CHAIR.
WE HAVE A PAIR OF DAEHREMMAN THUGS PREPARING TO ADMINISTER SOME TERMINAL DISCOMFORT
AND WE HAVE A DOORBELL.
RHING
CRAP

YOU'RE AN HONORABLE MAN, RIGHT GENERAL?
YOU KNOW YOU'RE ALREADY DEAD.
YOU ALSO KNOW THAT IF YOU CALL OUT THEN WHOEVER IS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT DOOR IS GOING TO BE DEAD TOO
FINE. WE'LL ALL WAIT QUIETLY FOR THEM TO GO AWAY
WHILE WE WAIT THOUGH, I'LL TAKE PLEASURE IMAGINING THE SCENE WHEN MY SON THE SO-CALLED ASSASSIN KILLED A WHOLE BUNCH OF YOUR SILGE WAD FRIENDS.


RRRRRING
PERSISTENT AREN'T THEY? WHO'S AT THE DOOR, GENERAL?
PROBABLY THE NEIGHBOR KIDS WANTING TO BORROW SOME SUGAR FOR MOM'S COOKIES.
HARD TO TELL FROM SHADOWS BUT IT LOOKS LIKE THREE GUYS, HUMAN AND A COUPLE OF THEM ARE BIG.
KIDS EH?
WHAT CAN I SAY? I'VE BEEN SLIPPING STEROIDS INTO THEIR SUGAR FOR YEARS.

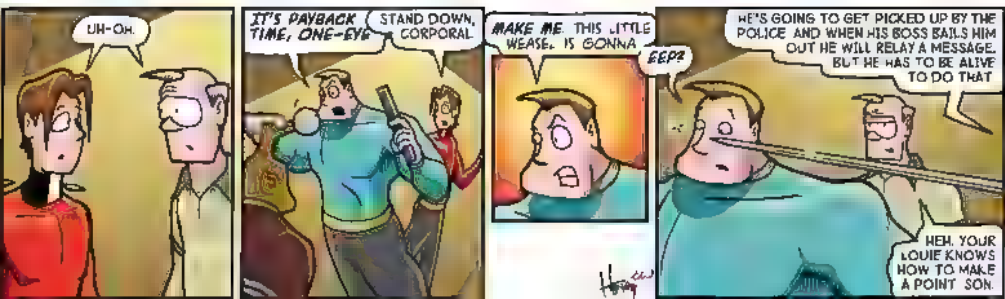
SHEP, WHAT IS IT?
THE NEWLY COMMISSIONED LIEUTENANT HAS A CHOICE
TWO NONS WI' GUNS HUMAN BETWEEN 'EM IN A CHAIR. I'VE GOT THE CHAIR
HIS GRUNTS ARE ABOUT TO ENGAGE IN A LITTLE B&E LIKELY FOLLOWED BY A BUNCH OF A&B
HE CAN'T SEE WHAT SHEP CAN, AND CANNOT THEREFORE MAKE AN INDEPENDENTLY INFORMED DECISION. HE CAN ONLY TRUST OR DISTRUST
REV?
YOU LEAD, SHEP I'LL GO LEFT
HELMET, SIR.
"LEADERSHIP THROUGH FOLLOWING THE RIGHT GRUNT" IT'S ONE MORE HALLMARK OF A LIEUTENANT WHO WON'T GET SHOT BY HIS OWN MEN.

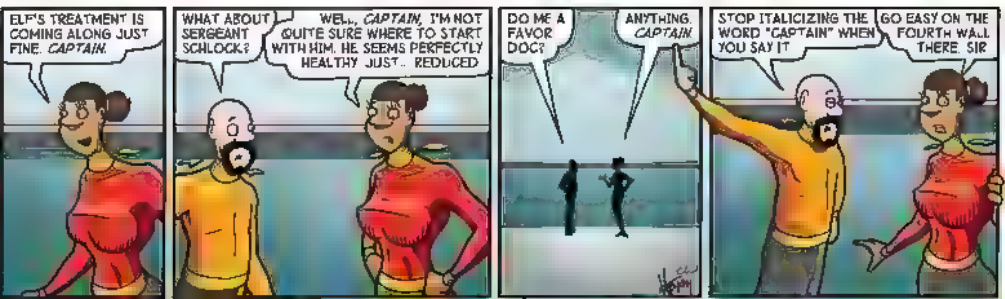

FULLY INERTIC FLIGHT-CAPABLE POWERED FULLERENE UNIFORMS ABOUT TWO YEARS SALARY FOR A GRUNT ASSUMING HE HAS TO BUY THEM HIMSELF
UNLICENSED SOLDIER-BOOSTING OF THE METABOLISM, ENHANCING STRENGTH SPEED AND REACTION TIME THREE YEARS SALARY AND FIVE IN PRISON IF YOU'RE CAUGHT
THE LOOK ON YOUR FOE'S FACE'S WHEN YOU TRASH IN FROM A STANDING START PRICELESS

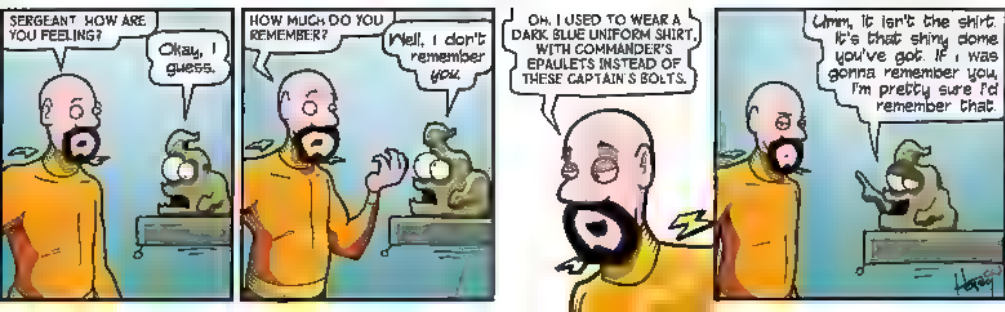

AN ACCOMPLISHED SWORDSMAN. THE REVEREND HAS BEEN DRILLING WITH SOME MORE USEFUL WEAPONS (FIREARMS!) ON THE COMPANY RANGE
IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT HOWEVER, HE REACHED FOR WHAT HE WAS MOST FAMILIAR MOST COMFORTABLE WITH
THIS ACTUALLY WORKED OUT OKAY
HOLD STILL, OR I'LL POKE YOU IN THE OTHER EYE
OKAY, UH-HUH OWIE

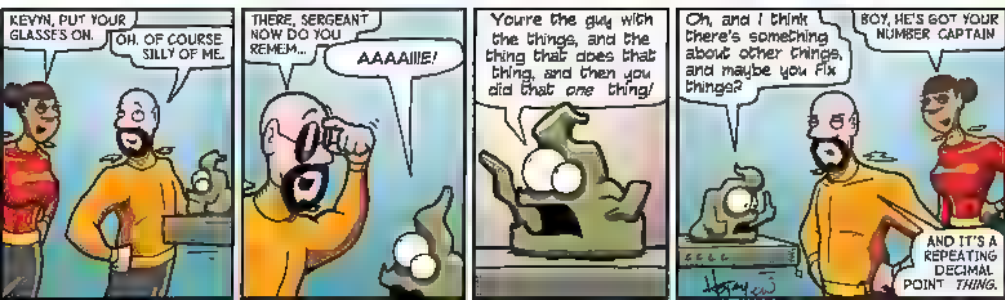
THE SCORE GOOD GUYS 2 BAD GUYS 0
YOU OKAY GENERAL?
JUST FINE, SON. IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME I'VE BEEN TACKLED BY A HUNDRED AND FIFTY KILOS OF HUMAN SHIELD
Schlock Mercenary
REV DIDJA STAKE THAT GUY TA TH' WALL ON PURPOSE?
IT'S CALLED MERCY, NICK. MY GUY IS MORE ALIVE THAN YOURS IS
MERCY!? YOU STUCK ME RIGHT THROUGH MY THROBB'N' EYE
THE GRACE OF GOD KNOWS NO BOUNDS. BUT MY MERCY HAS SOME PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS.

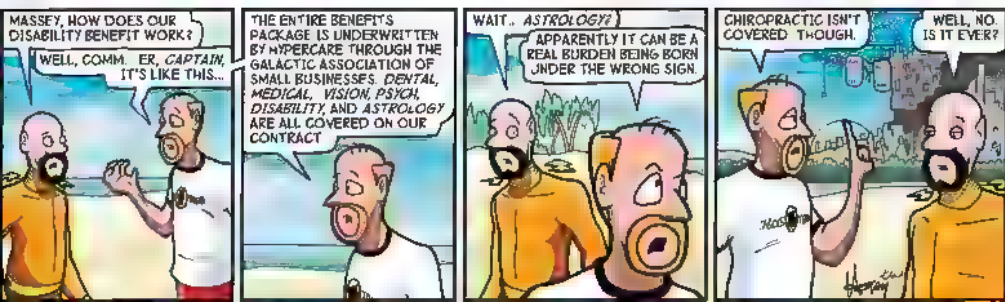
SORRY FOR THE MESS. GENERAL. WE CAME TO TALK TO YOU, AND SHEP HERE SUSPECTED THAT IF WE DIDN'T TALK NOW, YOU'D BE INDISPOSED TO TALK LATER.
A LOUIE WHO KNOWS HOW TO LISTEN TO THE ENLISTED MEN... DID YOU LEARN THAT FROM MY BOY?
[... UM... SIR, WE'RE HERE WITH BAD NEWS.
I HEARD IT ALREADY WINKY THERE SAYS MY SON ASSASSINATED HIS COLONEL, AND THEN DIED TRYING TO ESCAPE
I DON'T KNOW THE WHOLE STORY YET MYSELF I'M HERE TO INVITE YOU TO THE
WAITTAMINNIT... YOU SAYIN THIS GUY'S WIT' TH' OUTFIT WHAT KILLED TH' CAPTAIN?

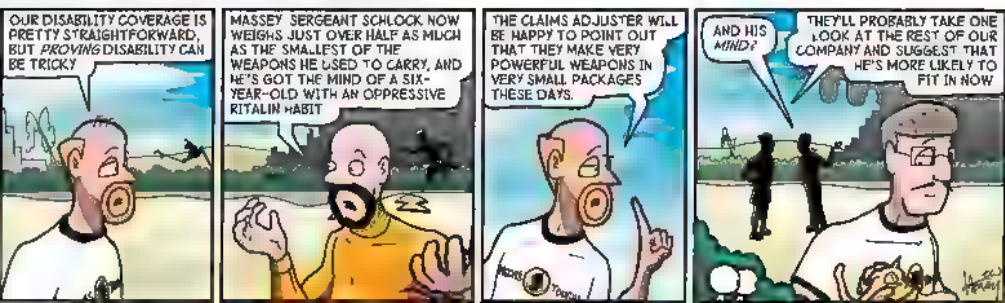

UH-OH.
IT'S PAYBACK TIME, ONE-EYE
STAND DOWN, CORPORAL
MAKE ME THIS LITTLE WEASEL IS GONNA
EEP?
HE'S GOING TO GET PICKED UP BY THE POLICE AND WHEN HIS BOSS BAILS HIM OUT HE WILL RELAY A MESSAGE. BUT HE HAS TO BE ALIVE TO DO THAT
HEH. YOUR LOUIE KNOWS HOW TO MAKE A POINT, SON.

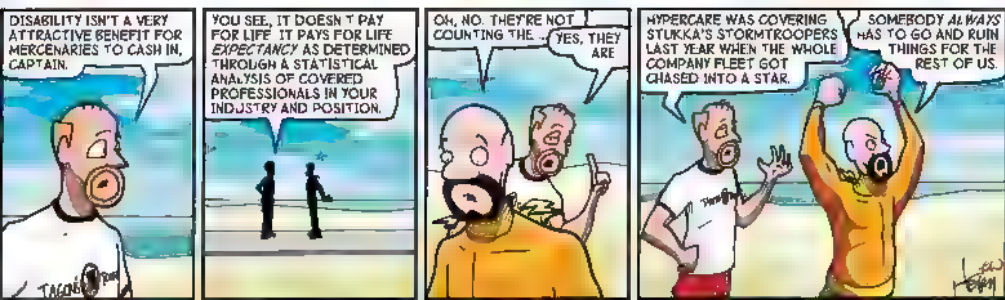

ELF'S TREATMENT IS COMING ALONG JUST FINE. *CAPTAIN.*
WHAT ABOUT SERGEANT SCHLOCK?
WELL, *CAPTAIN,* I'M NOT QUITE SURE WHERE TO START WITH HIM. HE SEEMS PERFECTLY HEALTHY JUST... REDUCED.
DO ME A FAVOR DOC?
ANYTHING, *CAPTAIN.*
STOP ITALICIZING THE WORD "CAPTAIN" WHEN YOU SAY IT
GO EASY ON THE FOURTH WALL THERE, SIR.

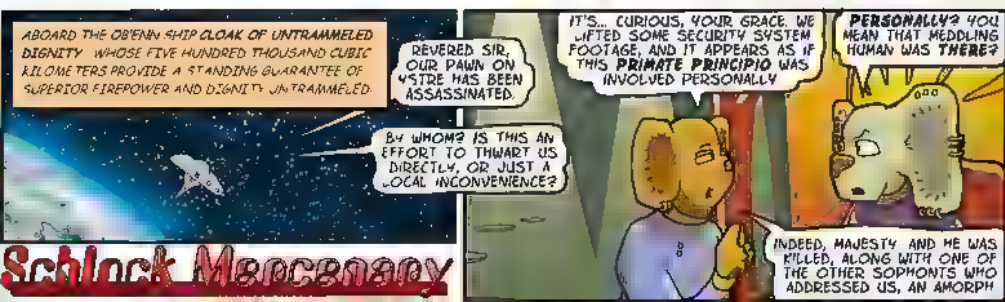

SERGEANT HOW ARE YOU FEELING?
Okay, I guess.
HOW MUCH DO YOU REMEMBER?
Well, I don't remember you.
OH, I USED TO WEAR A DARK BLUE UNIFORM SHIRT, WITH COMMANDER'S EPAULETS INSTEAD OF THESE CAPTAIN'S BOLTS.
Umm, it isn't the shirt. It's that shiny dome you've got. If I was gonna remember you, I'm pretty sure I'd remember that.

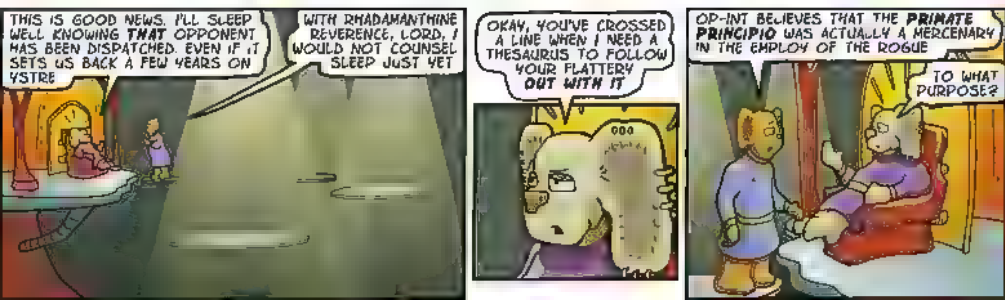

KEVYN, PUT YOUR GLASSES ON.
OH, OF COURSE SILLY OF ME.
THERE, SERGEANT NOW DO YOU REMEM...
AAAAIIIE!
You're the guy with the things, and the thing that does that thing, and then you did that *one* thing!
Oh, and I think there's something about other things, and maybe you fix things?
BOY, HE'S GOT YOUR NUMBER CAPTAIN
AND IT'S A REPEATING DECIMAL POINT *THING*.

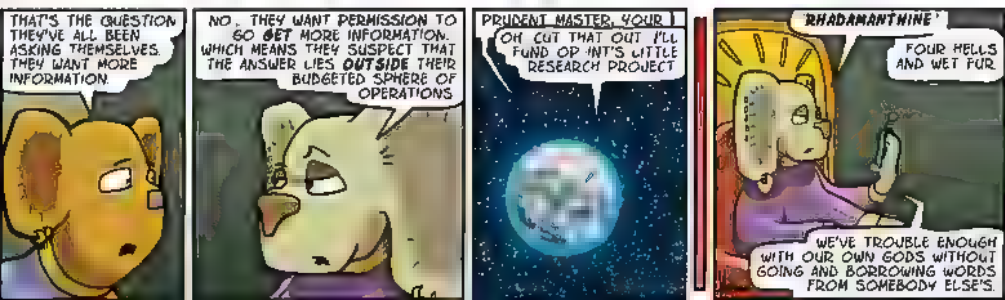

MASSEY, HOW DOES OUR DISABILITY BENEFIT WORK?
WELL, COMM... ER, CAPTAIN, IT'S LIKE THIS...
THE ENTIRE BENEFITS PACKAGE IS UNDERWRITTEN BY HYPERCARE THROUGH THE GALACTIC ASSOCIATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES. DENTAL, MEDICAL, VISION, PSYCH, DISABILITY, AND ASTROLOGY ARE ALL COVERED ON OUR CONTRACT.
WAIT.. ASTROLOGY?
APPARENTLY IT CAN BE A REAL BURDEN BEING BORN UNDER THE WRONG SIGN.
CHIROPRACTIC ISN'T COVERED THOUGH.
WELL, NO. IS IT EVER?

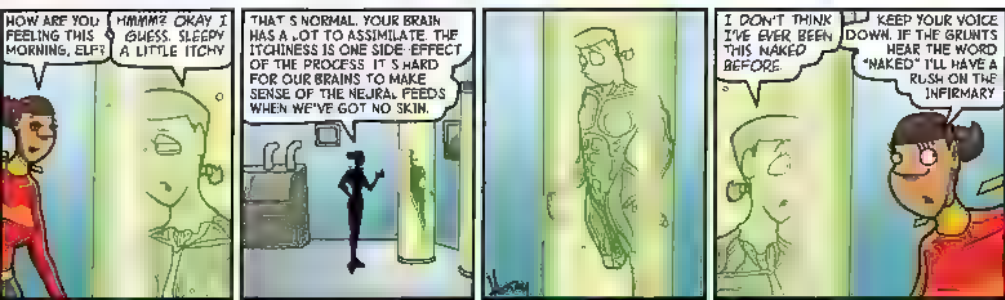

OUR DISABILITY COVERAGE IS PRETTY STRAIGHTFORWARD, BUT *PROVING* DISABILITY CAN BE TRICKY
MASSEY SERGEANT SCHLOCK NOW WEIGHS JUST OVER HALF AS MUCH AS THE SMALLEST OF THE WEAPONS HE USED TO CARRY, AND HE'S GOT THE MIND OF A SIX-YEAR-OLD WITH AN OPPRESSIVE RITALIN HABIT
THE CLAIMS ADJUSTER WILL BE HAPPY TO POINT OUT THAT THEY MAKE VERY POWERFUL WEAPONS IN VERY SMALL PACKAGES THESE DAYS.
AND HIS *MIND?*
THEY'LL PROBABLY TAKE ONE LOOK AT THE REST OF OUR COMPANY AND SUGGEST THAT HE'S MORE LIKELY TO FIT IN NOW

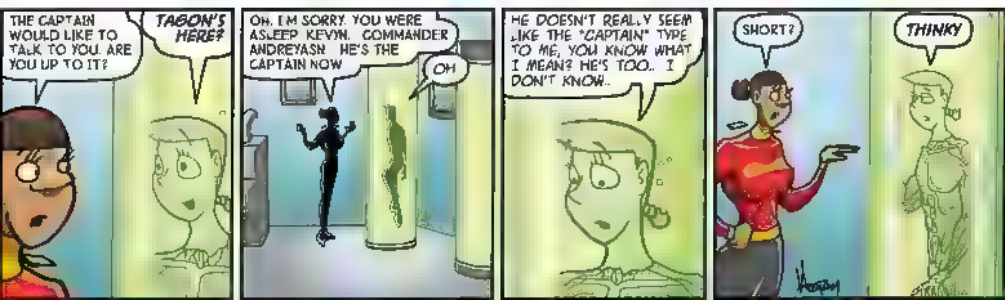

DISABILITY ISN'T A VERY ATTRACTIVE BENEFIT FOR MERCENARIES TO CASH IN, CAPTAIN.
YOU SEE, IT DOESN'T PAY FOR LIFE IT PAYS FOR LIFE *EXPECTANCY* AS DETERMINED THROUGH A STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF COVERED PROFESSIONALS IN YOUR INDUSTRY AND POSITION.
OH, NO. THEY'RE NOT COUNTING THE ...
YES, THEY ARE
HYPERCARE WAS COVERING STUKKA'S STORMTROOPERS LAST YEAR WHEN THE WHOLE COMPANY FLEET GOT CHASED INTO A STAR.
SOMEBODY *ALWAYS* HAS TO GO AND RUIN THINGS FOR THE REST OF US.


ABOARD THE OB'ENN SHIP CLOAK OF UNTRAMMELED DIGNITY WHOSE FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND CUBIC KILOMETERS PROVIDE A STANDING GUARANTEE OF SUPERIOR FIREPOWER AND DIGNITY UNTRAMMELED.
REVERED SIR, OUR PAWN ON YSTRE HAS BEEN ASSASSINATED.
BY WHOM? IS THIS AN EFFORT TO THWART US DIRECTLY, OR JUST A LOCAL INCONVENIENCE?
IT'S... CURIOUS, YOUR GRACE. WE LIFTED SOME SECURITY SYSTEM FOOTAGE, AND IT APPEARS AS IF THIS PRIMATE PRINCIPIO WAS INVOLVED PERSONALLY
PERSONALLY? YOU MEAN THAT MEDDLING HUMAN WAS THERE?
INDEED, MAJESTY AND HE WAS KILLED, ALONG WITH ONE OF THE OTHER SOPHONTS WHO ADDRESSED US, AN AMORPH
Schlock Mercenary


THIS IS GOOD NEWS. I'LL SLEEP WELL KNOWING **THAT** OPPONENT HAS BEEN DISPATCHED. EVEN IF IT SETS US BACK A FEW YEARS ON YSTRE
WITH RHADAMANTHINE REVERENCE, LORD, I WOULD NOT COUNSEL SLEEP JUST YET
OKAY, YOU'VE CROSSED A LINE WHEN I NEED A THESAURUS TO FOLLOW YOUR FLATTERY **OUT WITH IT**
OP-INT BELIEVES THAT THE **PRIMATE PRINCIPIO** WAS ACTUALLY A MERCENARY IN THE EMPLOY OF THE ROGUE
TO WHAT PURPOSE?

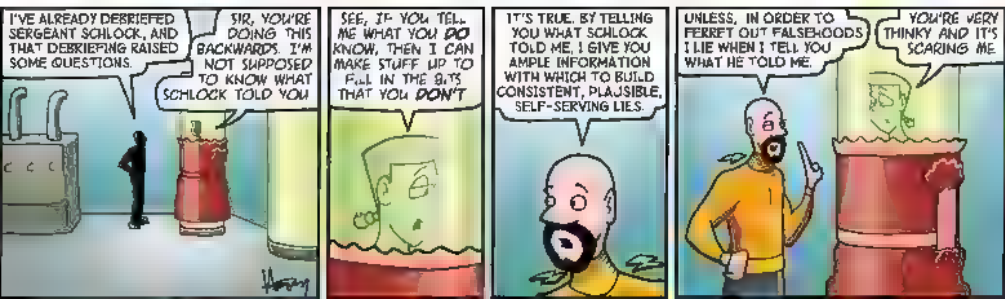

THAT'S THE QUESTION THEY'VE ALL BEEN ASKING THEMSELVES. THEY WANT MORE INFORMATION.
NO. THEY WANT PERMISSION TO GO GET MORE INFORMATION. WHICH MEANS THEY SUSPECT THAT THE ANSWER LIES OUTSIDE THEIR BUDGETED SPHERE OF OPERATIONS.
PRUDENT MASTER, YOUR
OH CUT THAT OUT I'LL FUND OP INT'S LITTLE RESEARCH PROJECT
RHADAMANTHINE
FOUR HELLS AND WET FUR.
WE'VE TROUBLE ENOUGH WITH OUR OWN GODS WITHOUT GOING AND BORROWING WORDS FROM SOMEBODY ELSE'S.


HOW ARE YOU FEELING THIS MORNING, ELF?
HMMMM? OKAY I GUESS. SLEEPY A LITTLE ITCHY
THAT'S NORMAL. YOUR BRAIN HAS A LOT TO ASSIMILATE. THE ITCHINESS IS ONE SIDE-EFFECT OF THE PROCESS. IT'S HARD FOR OUR BRAINS TO MAKE SENSE OF THE NEURAL FEEDS WHEN WE'VE GOT NO SKIN.
I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER BEEN THIS NAKED BEFORE.
KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN. IF THE GRUNTS HEAR THE WORD "NAKED" I'LL HAVE A RUSH ON THE INFIRMARY


THE CAPTAIN WOULD LIKE TO TALK TO YOU. ARE YOU UP TO IT?
TAGON'S HERE?
OH. I'M SORRY. YOU WERE ASLEEP KEVYN. COMMANDER ANDREYASN HE'S THE CAPTAIN NOW
OH
HE DOESN'T REALLY SEEM LIKE THE "CAPTAIN" TYPE TO ME, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? HE'S TOO.. I DON'T KNOW..
SHORT?
THINKY

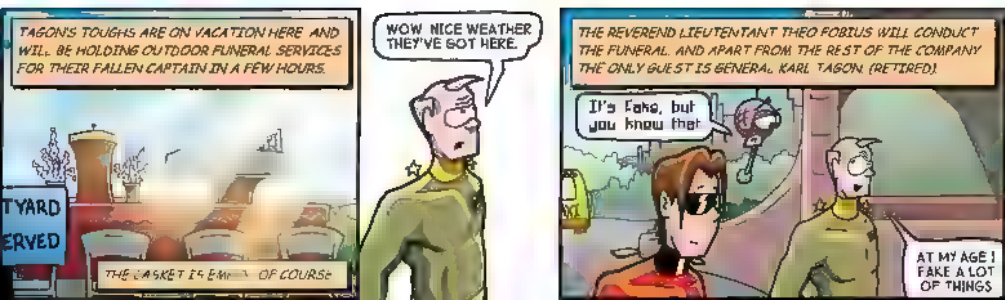
I CAN'T SEE OUR NEW CAPTAIN LIKE THIS. I'M AS NAKED AS THE DAY I WAS BORN AND THEN SOME
WELL, I CAN'T PUT ANY CLOTHING IN THERE WITH YOU. IT WOULD INTERFERE WITH GROWTH, AND YOU'D JUST END UP LOOKING LIKE A DROWNED ZOMBIE ANYWAY
YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO MAKE A GIRL FEEL PRETTY
PRETTY. THERE'S AN IDEA.
I DIDN'T REALIZE WE HAD CLOTHING IN YOUR CURRENT SIZE, ELF
HEY, WITH NANO-SPANDEX ONE SIZE REALLY DOES FIT ALL.

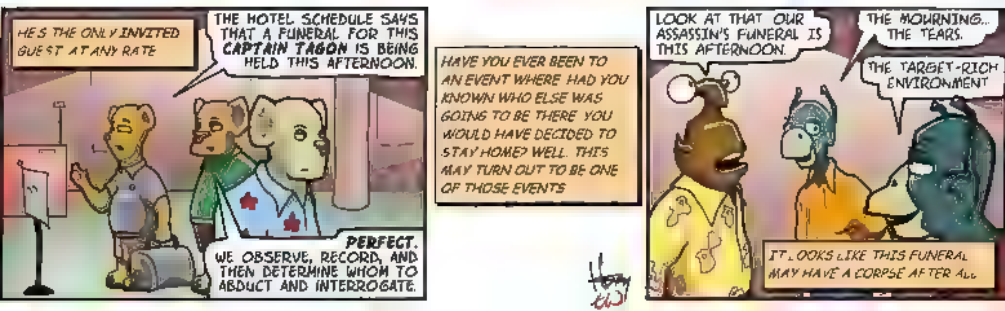
ELF, IF YOU FEEL UP TO IT I'D LIKE TO DEBRIEF YOU ON THE YSTRE MISSION.
I GUESS I'M THE ONLY WITNESS, HUH?
SCHLOCK REMEMBERS SOME OF WHAT HAPPENED AFTER WHATEVER HIT HIM, BUT HIS PERSPECTIVE SEEMS TO BE RATHER LIMITED
HE SPENT THE REST OF THE MISSION INSIDE A VERY EXPENSIVE CUP, SIR.
AND TO HEAR HIM TELL IT, HE FIGURED OUT HOW TO MAKE IT FLY?
I MUST HAVE MISSED THAT

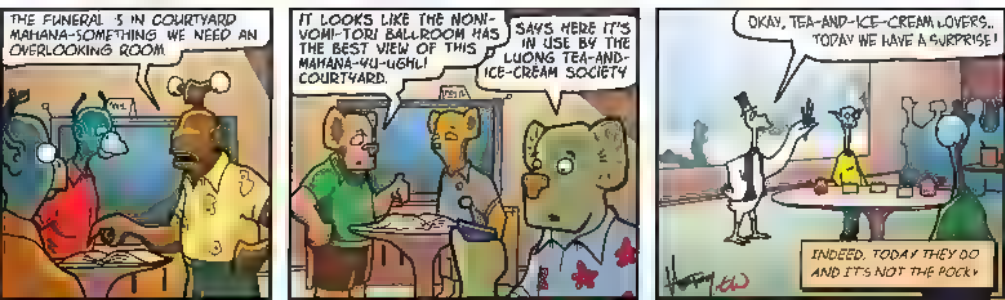

I'VE ALREADY DEBRIEFED SERGEANT SCHLOCK, AND THAT DEBRIEFING RAISED SOME QUESTIONS.
SIR, YOU'RE DOING THIS BACKWARDS. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHAT SCHLOCK TOLD YOU
SEE, IF YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU DO KNOW, THEN I CAN MAKE STUFF UP TO FILL IN THE BITS THAT YOU DON'T
IT'S TRUE. BY TELLING YOU WHAT SCHLOCK TOLD ME, I GIVE YOU AMPLE INFORMATION WITH WHICH TO BUILD CONSISTENT, PLAUSIBLE, SELF-SERVING LIES.
UNLESS, IN ORDER TO FERRET OUT FALSEHOODS I LIE WHEN I TELL YOU WHAT HE TOLD ME.
YOU'RE VERY THINKY AND IT'S SCARING ME.

SCHLOCK SAID THAT YOU AND CAPTAIN TAGON WERE KISSING. IS THIS TRUE?
YEAH.
ARE YOU GOING TO MAKE SOMETHING OF IT?
I WAS WORRIED THAT YOU MIGHT MAKE SOMETHING OF IT, AND SLAP THE COMPANY WITH A HARASSMENT SUIT
WELL, IT WASN'T HARASSMENT. IT WAS VERY POORLY TIMED ROMANCE.
YOU JUST RECORDED THAT FOR OUR LAWYER.
AND HE'S GOING TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP TONIGHT

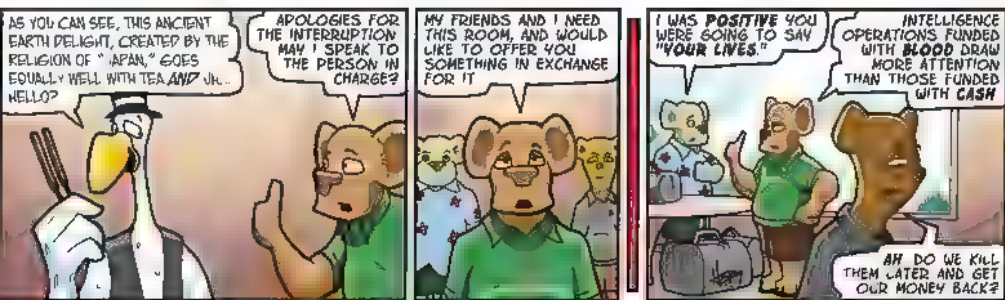
"THE NATIVES CALL IT MAHUITALOTU-COCOBANATUITUIMAYA BOHU BUT YOU'LL CALL IT PARADISE" OR SO SAYS THE FLYER YOUR TRAVEL AGENT HANDED YOU. THIS IS MISLEADING
THE FULL NAME IS ACTUALLY AN ADDRESS IT'S THE BOHU DISTRICT OF TUITUIMAYA CITY ON THE COCOBANA ARCHIPELAGO ON THE WORLD OF MAHUITALOTU AND THERE ARE NO NATIVES FOR WHOM THOSE WORDS HAVE ACTUAL MEANINGS. THE WORLD WAS TERRAFORMED 600 YEARS AGO AND IS ON LEASE FROM THE WORMGATE CORPORATION.
WELCOME TO MAHUITALOTU YOU'RE CLEARED TO LAND AT PORT TUITUIMAYA, APPROACH PATTERN WHISKEY TANGO FOXTROT ALOHA!
IT'S ON LEASE TO A GROUP OF WEALTHY CAUCASIAN HUMAN MALES WHO THOUGHT THAT POLYNESIAN PHONEMES MIGHT RAISE THE BOTTOM LINE
Sellock Mercenary


TAGON'S TOUGHS ARE ON VACATION HERE AND WILL BE HOLDING OUTDOOR FUNERAL SERVICES FOR THEIR FALLEN CAPTAIN IN A FEW HOURS.
TYARD
ERVED
THE CASKET IS EM OF COURSE
WOW. NICE WEATHER THEY'VE GOT HERE.
THE REVEREND LIEUTENTANT THEO FOBIUS WILL CONDUCT THE FUNERAL. AND APART FROM THE REST OF THE COMPANY THE ONLY GUEST IS GENERAL KARL TAGON. (RETIRED)
It's fake, but you know that
AT MY AGE I FAKE A LOT OF THINGS

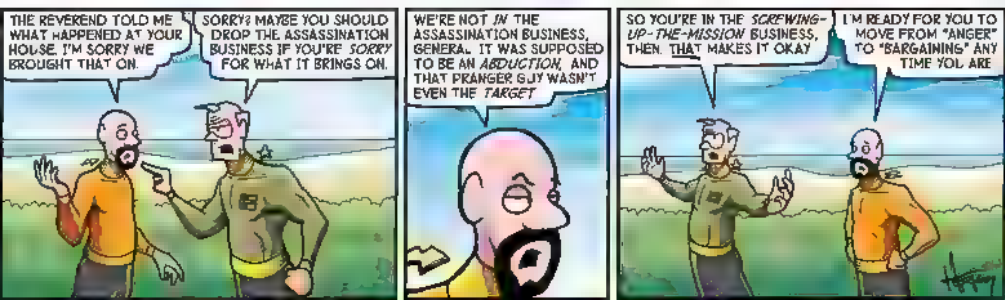

HE'S THE ONLY INVITED GUEST AT ANY RATE
THE HOTEL SCHEDULE SAYS THAT A FUNERAL FOR THIS CAPTAIN TAGON IS BEING HELD THIS AFTERNOON.
PERFECT. WE OBSERVE, RECORD, AND THEN DETERMINE WHOM TO ABDUCT AND INTERROGATE.
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO AN EVENT WHERE HAD YOU KNOWN WHO ELSE WAS GOING TO BE THERE YOU WOULD HAVE DECIDED TO STAY HOME? WELL. THIS MAY TURN OUT TO BE ONE OF THOSE EVENTS
LOOK AT THAT OUR ASSASSIN'S FUNERAL IS THIS AFTERNOON.
THE MOURNING... THE TEARS.
THE TARGET-RICH ENVIRONMENT
IT LOOKS LIKE THIS FUNERAL MAY HAVE A CORPSE AFTER ALL

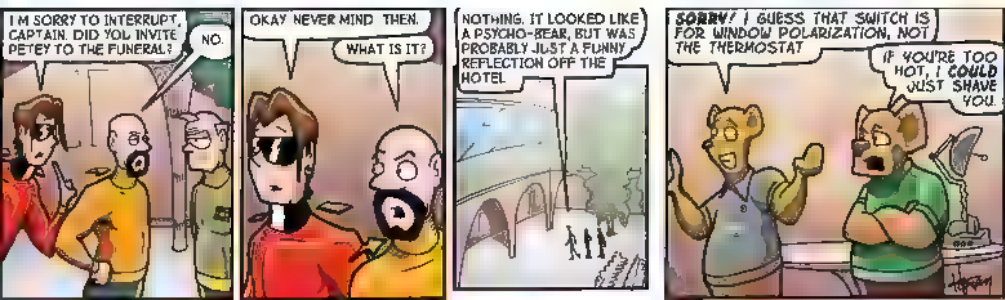

THE FUNERAL IS IN COURTYARD MAHANA-SOMETHING WE NEED AN OVERLOOKING ROOM
IT LOOKS LIKE THE NONI-VOMI-TORI BALLROOM HAS THE BEST VIEW OF THIS MAHANA-WU-UGHI COURTYARD.
SAYS HERE IT'S IN USE BY THE LUONG TEA-AND-ICE-CREAM SOCIETY
OKAY, TEA-AND-ICE-CREAM LOVERS... TODAY WE HAVE A SURPRISE!
INDEED, TODAY THEY DO AND IT'S NOT THE POCKY

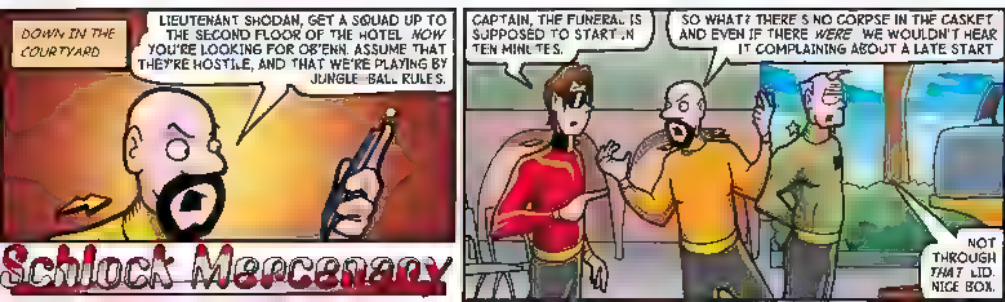
THIS COURTYARD IS PERFECT FOR THE FUNERAL, CAPTAIN. THE CONGREGATION WILL FACE THE BEACH, WHICH MANY CULTURES USE TO REPRESENT THE PASSAGE INTO ETERNITY
THE TREES AROUND THE BORDER WILL OFFER US A CLOISTERED, PRIVATE FEELING, AND THE HOTEL BEHIND US WILL SERVE AS A WINDBREAK KEEPING THINGS PEACEFUL
IT SOUNDS GOOD TO ME
LIKE I SAID, IT'S PERFECT
THIS IS PERFECT FROM THE NONI ROOM WE CAN FIRE UNOBSTRUCTED INTO THE COURTYARD BELOW AND WE HAVE A STRAIGHT 30-METER RUN TO THE PARKING LOT FOR OUR ESCAPE.
OH YEAH PERFECT


AS YOU CAN SEE, THIS ANCIENT EARTH DELIGHT, CREATED BY THE RELIGION OF "APAN," GOES EQUALLY WELL WITH TEA AND UH... HELLO?
APOLOGIES FOR THE INTERRUPTION MAY I SPEAK TO THE PERSON IN CHARGE?
MY FRIENDS AND I NEED THIS ROOM, AND WOULD LIKE TO OFFER YOU SOMETHING IN EXCHANGE FOR IT
I WAS POSITIVE YOU WERE GOING TO SAY "YOUR LIVES."
INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS FUNDED WITH BLOOD DRAW MORE ATTENTION THAN THOSE FUNDED WITH CASH
AH DO WE KILL THEM LATER AND GET OUR MONEY BACK?

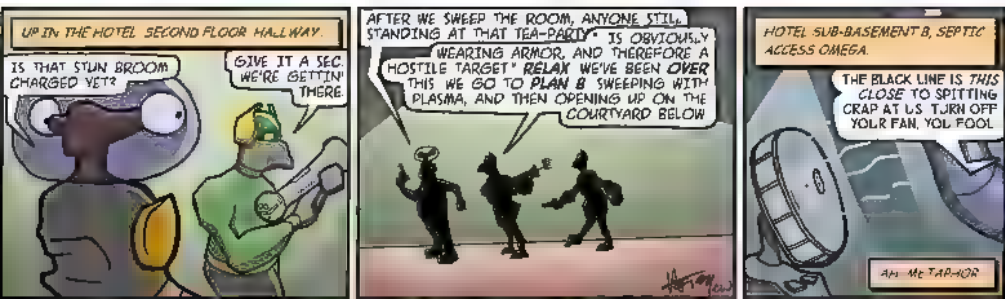
GENERAL TAGON, IT'S A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU.
YOU IN CHARGE OF THIS OUTFIT NOW, BOY?
INDEED. CAPTAIN KEVYN ANDREYASN, AT YOUR SERVICE, SIR
WELL, YOU LOOK LIKE YOU COULD LEAD A SALTY COMPANY OF JERKED GRUNTS INTO THE MAW OF CERTAIN DEATH.
THANK YOU.
THAT WASN'T A COMPLIMENT

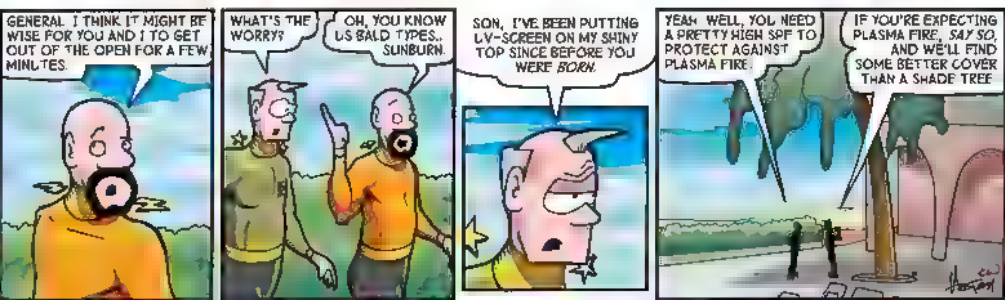

THE REVEREND TOLD ME WHAT HAPPENED AT YOUR HOUSE. I'M SORRY WE BROUGHT THAT ON.
SORRY? MAYBE YOU SHOULD DROP THE ASSASSINATION BUSINESS IF YOU'RE *SORRY* FOR WHAT IT BRINGS ON.
WE'RE NOT *IN* THE ASSASSINATION BUSINESS, GENERAL. IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE AN *ABDUCTION*, AND THAT PRANGER GUY WASN'T EVEN THE *TARGET*
SO YOU'RE IN THE *SCREWING-UP-THE-MISSION* BUSINESS, THEN. THAT MAKES IT OKAY
I'M READY FOR YOU TO MOVE FROM "ANGER" TO "BARGAINING" ANY TIME YOU ARE

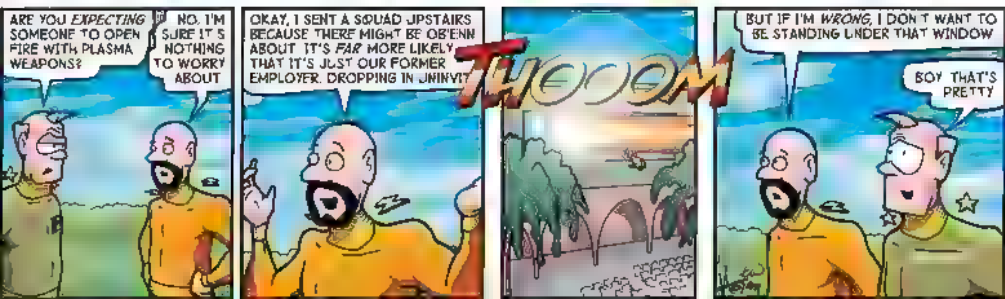

I'M SORRY TO INTERRUPT, CAPTAIN. DID YOU INVITE PETEY TO THE FUNERAL?
NO.
OKAY. NEVER MIND THEN.
WHAT IS IT?
NOTHING. IT LOOKED LIKE A PSYCHO-BEAR, BUT WAS PROBABLY JUST A FUNNY REFLECTION OFF THE HOTEL.
SORRY! I GUESS THAT SWITCH IS FOR WINDOW POLARIZATION, NOT THE THERMOSTAT.
IF YOU'RE TOO HOT, I COULD JUST SHAVE YOU.


DOWN IN THE COURTYARD
LIEUTENANT SHODAN, GET A SQUAD UP TO THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE HOTEL NOW YOU'RE LOOKING FOR OB'ENN. ASSUME THAT THEY'RE HOSTILE, AND THAT WE'RE PLAYING BY JUNGLE BALL RULES.
Schlock Mercenary
CAPTAIN, THE FUNERAL IS SUPPOSED TO START IN TEN MINUTES.
SO WHAT? THERE'S NO CORPSE IN THE CASKET AND EVEN IF THERE WERE WE WOULDN'T HEAR IT COMPLAINING ABOUT A LATE START.
NOT THROUGH THAT LID. NICE BOX.

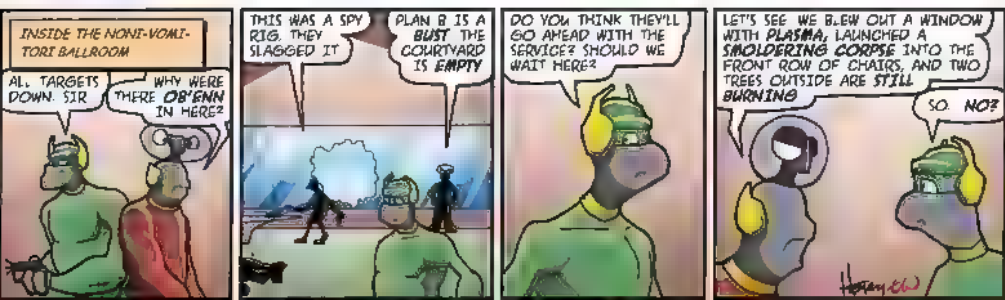
UP IN THE HOTEL SECOND FLOOR NONI WHATSIT CONFERENCE ROOM.
UH OH
THEIR CAPTAIN IS SENDING A SQUAD UP HERE TO INVESTIGATE. BURN THE BOOKS AND LET'S MOVE. WE DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO SHOOT OUR WAY TO THE PARKING LOT
GRUFF! TO KING GREGOR. LAST CALL INCOMING, REPEAT, LAST CALL
NONONO! NOT F7.
Are you sure you want to purge? This operation cannot be undone > Y/N?
I'M NOT HITTING F7 JUST LET ME DO THIS.


UP IN THE HOTEL SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY.
IS THAT STUN BROOM CHARGED YET?
GIVE IT A SEC. WE'RE GETTIN' THERE.
AFTER WE SWEEP THE ROOM, ANYONE STILL STANDING AT THAT TEA-PARTY* IS OBVIOUSLY WEARING ARMOR, AND THEREFORE A HOSTILE TARGET* RELAX WE'VE BEEN OVER THIS WE GO TO PLAN B SWEEPING WITH PLASMA, AND THEN OPENING UP ON THE COURTYARD BELOW
HOTEL SUB-BASEMENT B, SEPTIC ACCESS OMEGA.
THE BLACK LINE IS THIS CLOSE TO SPITTING CRAP AT US TURN OFF YOUR FAN, YOU FOOL
AN METAPHOR


GENERAL. I THINK IT MIGHT BE WISE FOR YOU AND I TO GET OUT OF THE OPEN FOR A FEW MINUTES.
WHAT'S THE WORRY?
OH, YOU KNOW US BALD TYPES.. SUNBURN.
SON, I'VE BEEN PUTTING LV-SCREEN ON MY SHINY TOP SINCE BEFORE YOU WERE BORN.
YEAH WELL, YOU NEED A PRETTY HIGH SPF TO PROTECT AGAINST PLASMA FIRE.
IF YOU'RE EXPECTING PLASMA FIRE, SAY SO, AND WE'LL FIND SOME BETTER COVER THAN A SHADE TREE.


ARE YOU *EXPECTING* SOMEONE TO OPEN FIRE WITH PLASMA WEAPONS?
NO. I'M SURE IT'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT
OKAY, I SENT A SQUAD UPSTAIRS BECAUSE THERE MIGHT BE OB'ENN ABOUT IT'S *FAR* MORE LIKELY THAT IT'S JUST OUR FORMER EMPLOYER DROPPING IN UNINVITED
THOOOM
BUT IF I'M *WRONG*, I DON'T WANT TO BE STANDING UNDER THAT WINDOW
BOY THAT'S PRETTY

SHODAN, WHICH ONE OF YOUR MEATHEADS OPENED UP WITH PLASMA WEAPONS?
WASN'T US, SIR. WE'RE HUNKERED DOWN IN THE STAIRWELL WAITING TO SEE HOW THIS SHAKES OUT
OKAY I RETRACT THE MEATHEAD COMMENT
THANKS.
THEY'RE GOING TO NEED MORE ORDERS, SON.
YOU KNOW, SOME MORE ORDERS WOULD BE NICE RIGHT ABOUT NOW SIR
GET YOUR GAME ON, BOY.

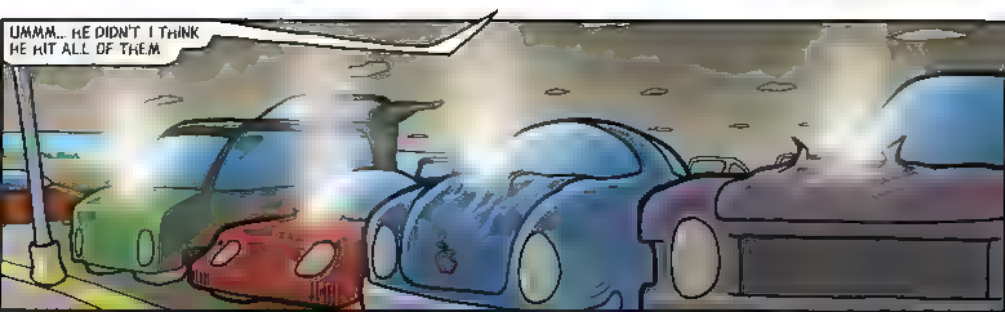

INSIDE THE NONI-VOMI-TORI BALLROOM
AL. TARGETS DOWN. SIR
WHY WERE THERE OB'ENN IN HERE?
THIS WAS A SPY RIG. THEY SLAGGED IT
PLAN B IS A BUST. THE COURTYARD IS EMPTY
DO YOU THINK THEY'LL GO AHEAD WITH THE SERVICE? SHOULD WE WAIT HERE?
LET'S SEE. WE BLEW OUT A WINDOW WITH PLASMA, LAUNCHED A SMOLDERING CORPSE INTO THE FRONT ROW OF CHAIRS, AND TWO TREES OUTSIDE ARE STILL BURNING
SO. NO?

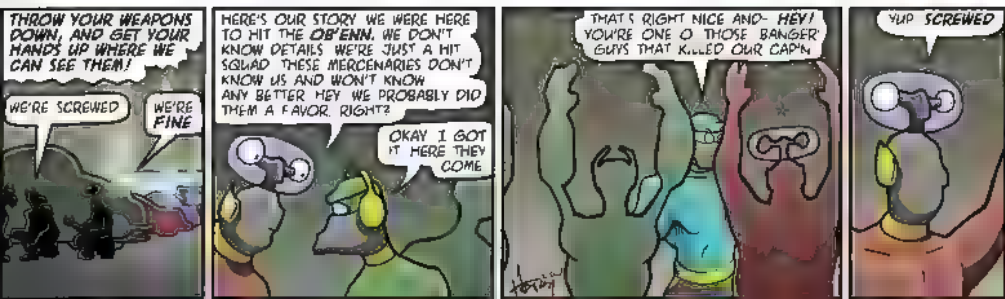
CAPTAIN, THIS BODY IN THE COURTYARD IS OB'ENN.
PSYCHOBEARS DON'T DO THE TOURIST THING.
IF THEY WERE HERE, THEY WERE HERE FOR US.
SO WHO SHOT 'EM?
ENEMY OF MY ENEMY ..
" .. IS MY ENEMY'S ENEMY, NO MORE NO LESS." MAXIM TWENTY-NINE.
WHEN THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY IS WILLING TO USE PLASMA WEAPONS INSIDE A HOTEL, I THINK I CAN DO BETTER THAN STUPID APHORISMS, GENERAL.

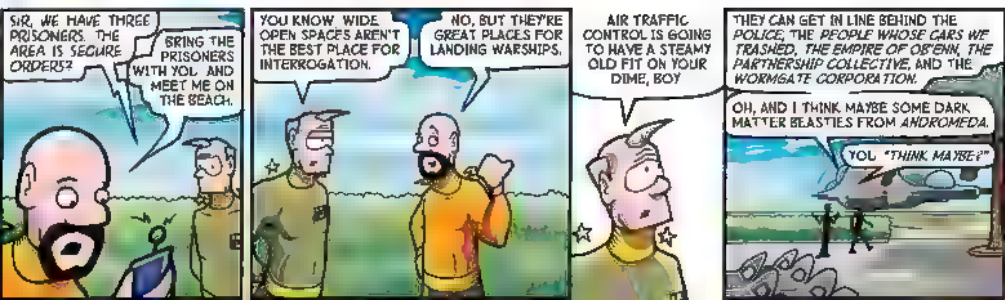
CAPTAIN, I JUST MADE OUT THREE GUYS CROSSING THE HALL. THEY'RE HEADED FOR PARKING AREA "ALOHA OE"
STAY ON THEM. DER TRIHS. SCRAMBLE A PLATOON TO THAT PARKING LOT. BUT TAKE COVER
REVEREND, CALL HOTEL SECURITY AND LIAISE BETWEEN THEM AND THE GRUNTS. MAKE SURE THEY KNOW THAT WE ARE THE GOOD GUYS.
ENNESBY GET THE *SERIAL PEACEMAKER* TO THE BEACH FOR DUSTOFF
DUSTOFF? YOU'RE GOING TO RUN AWAY FROM THREE GUYS?
NO, I'M GOING TO KILL OR CAPTURE THOSE THREE GUYS. AND THEN RUN AWAY FROM THE POLICE.

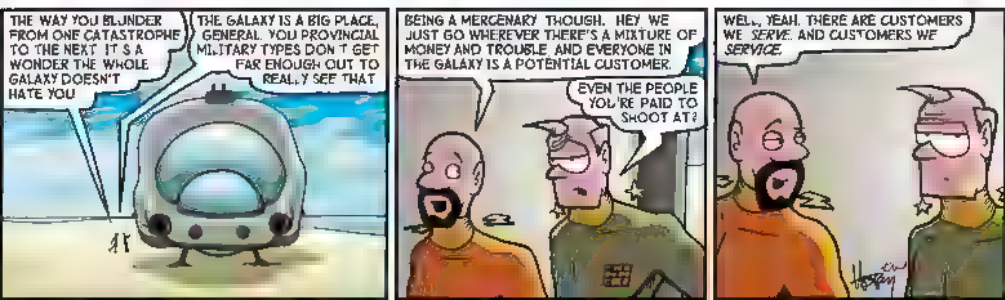
SHODAN STATUS REPORT!
NO VEHICLES HAVE LEFT THE LOT YET IF THE PERIMETER IS SECURE, THE ENEMY IS STILL IN THERE
DER TRIBS HAVE YOU REACHED THE PARKING LOT YET?
NO SIR. WE WERE ALL UP IN 725 CHANGING WHEN YOU CALLED
WELL, WHERE ARE YOU NOW?
STILL IN THE SUITE, SIR
Schlock Mercenary

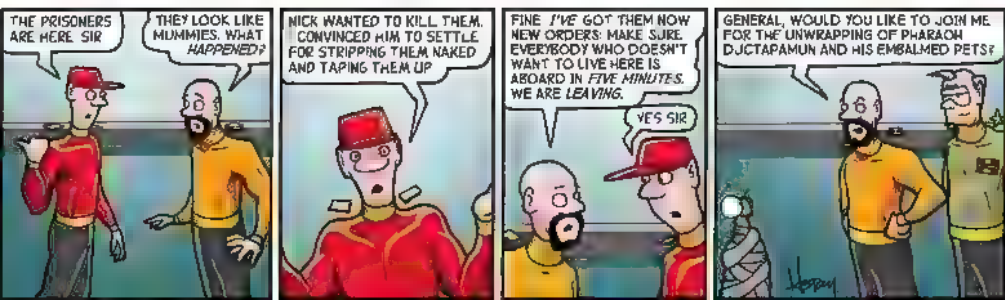
DER TRIHS! I TOLD YOU TO
I KNOW, I KNOW!
OUR SUITE OVERLOOKS THE PARKING AREA.
BUT IT'S COVERED PARKING!
YEAH, BUT THE COVER IS JUST SHADE FABRIC. SHEP SAID HE COULD STILL MAKE OUT SOME DETAIL, SO HE DISABLED THEIR VEHICLE FROM UP HERE.
WOW. HOW DID HE KNOW WHICH VEHICLE TO HIT?

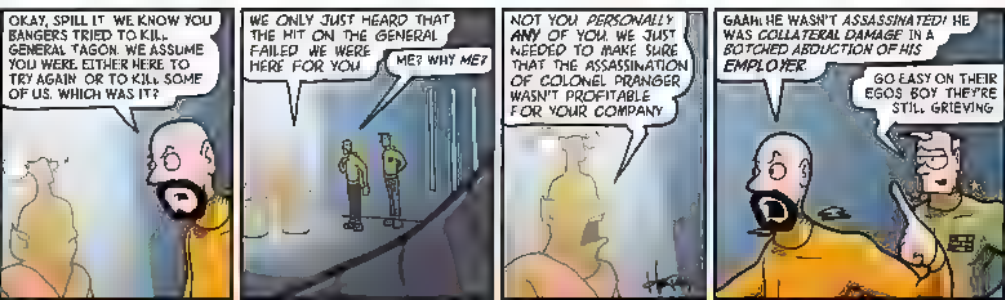

UMMM... HE DIDN'T I THINK HE HIT ALL OF THEM

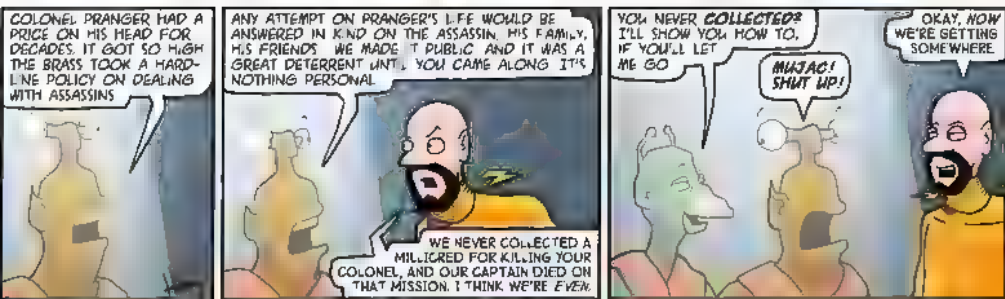

THROW YOUR WEAPONS DOWN, AND GET YOUR HANDS UP WHERE WE CAN SEE THEM!
WE'RE SCREWED
WE'RE FINE
HERE'S OUR STORY WE WERE HERE TO HIT THE OB'ENN. WE DON'T KNOW DETAILS WE'RE JUST A HIT SQUAD THESE MERCENARIES DON'T KNOW US AND WON'T KNOW ANY BETTER HEY WE PROBABLY DID THEM A FAVOR, RIGHT?
OKAY I GOT IT HERE THEY COME
THAT'S RIGHT NICE AND- HEY! YOU'RE ONE O THOSE BANGER GUYS THAT KILLED OUR CAP'N
YUP SCREWED

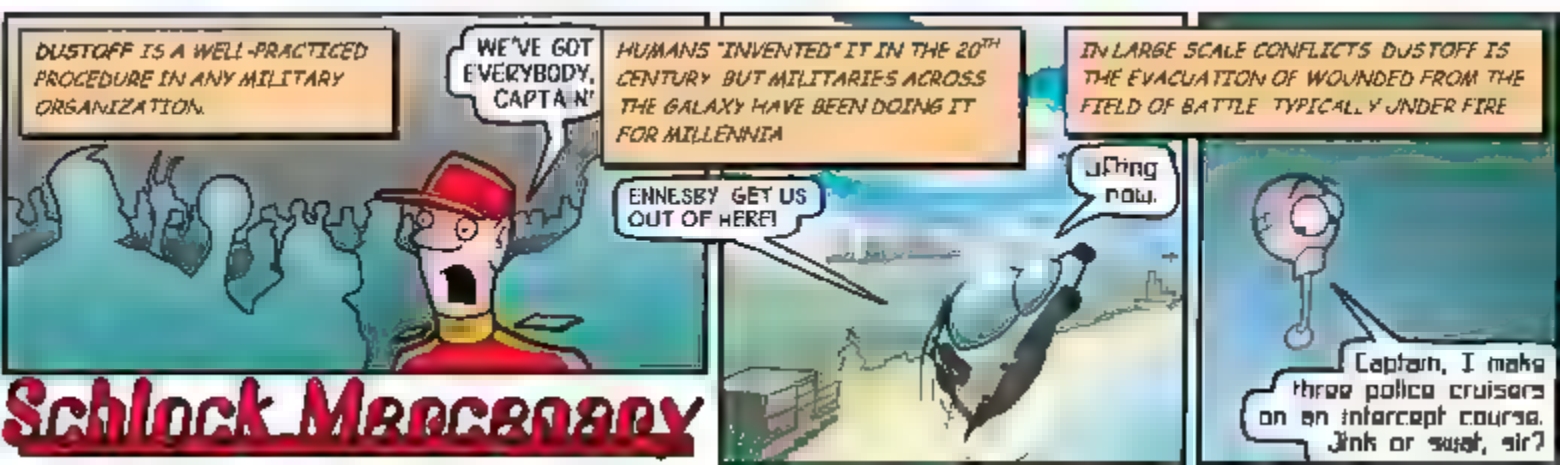

SIR, WE HAVE THREE PRISONERS. THE AREA IS SECURE ORDERS?
BRING THE PRISONERS WITH YOU AND MEET ME ON THE BEACH.
YOU KNOW WIDE OPEN SPACES AREN'T THE BEST PLACE FOR INTERROGATION.
NO, BUT THEY'RE GREAT PLACES FOR LANDING WARSHIPS.
AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL IS GOING TO HAVE A STEAMY OLD FIT ON YOUR DIME, BOY
THEY CAN GET IN LINE BEHIND THE POLICE, THE PEOPLE WHOSE CARS WE TRASHED, THE EMPIRE OF OB'ENN, THE PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE, AND THE WORMGATE CORPORATION.
OH, AND I THINK MAYBE SOME DARK MATTER BEASTIES FROM ANDROMEDA.
YOU "THINK MAYBE?"


THE WAY YOU BLUNDER FROM ONE CATASTROPHE TO THE NEXT IT'S A WONDER THE WHOLE GALAXY DOESN'T HATE YOU
THE GALAXY IS A BIG PLACE, GENERAL. YOU PROVINCIAL MILITARY TYPES DON'T GET FAR ENOUGH OUT TO REALLY SEE THAT
BEING A MERCENARY THOUGH. HEY WE JUST GO WHEREVER THERE'S A MIXTURE OF MONEY AND TROUBLE AND EVERYONE IN THE GALAXY IS A POTENTIAL CUSTOMER.
EVEN THE PEOPLE YOU'RE PAID TO SHOOT AT?
WELL, YEAH. THERE ARE CUSTOMERS WE SERVE. AND CUSTOMERS WE SERVICE.

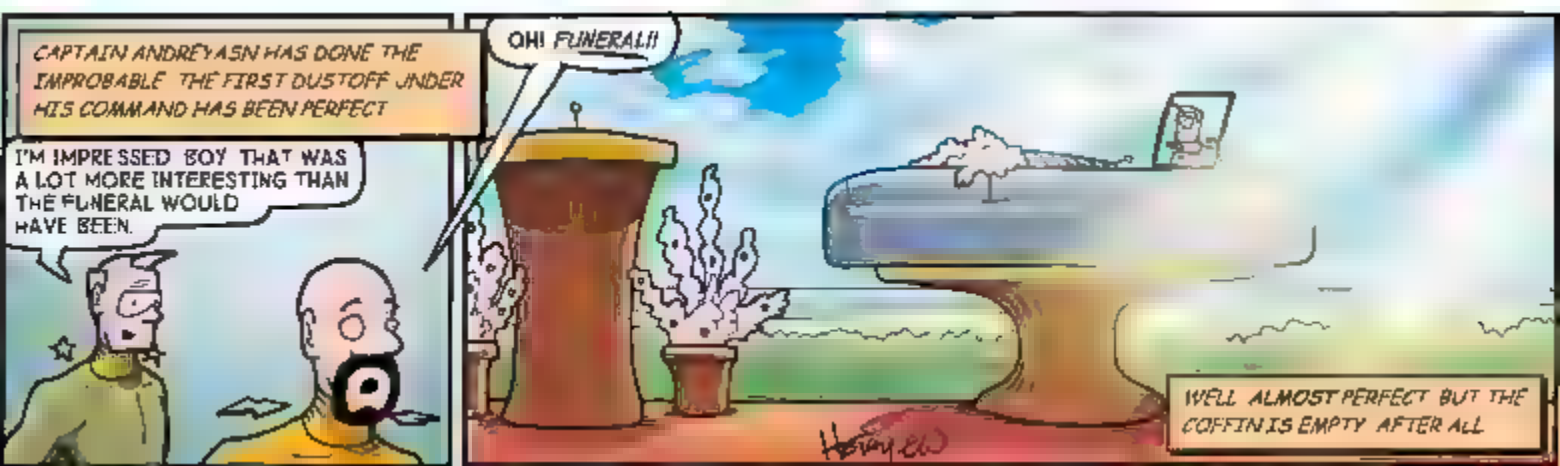

THE PRISONERS ARE HERE SIR
THEY LOOK LIKE MUMMIES. WHAT *HAPPENED?*
NICK WANTED TO KILL THEM. I CONVINCED HIM TO SETTLE FOR STRIPPING THEM NAKED AND TAPING THEM UP
FINE *I'VE* GOT THEM NOW NEW ORDERS: MAKE SURE EVERYBODY WHO DOESN'T WANT TO LIVE HERE IS ABOARD IN *FIVE MINUTES.* WE ARE *LEAVING.*
YES SIR
GENERAL, WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN ME FOR THE UNWRAPPING OF PHARAOH DJCTAPAMUN AND HIS EMBALMED PETS?

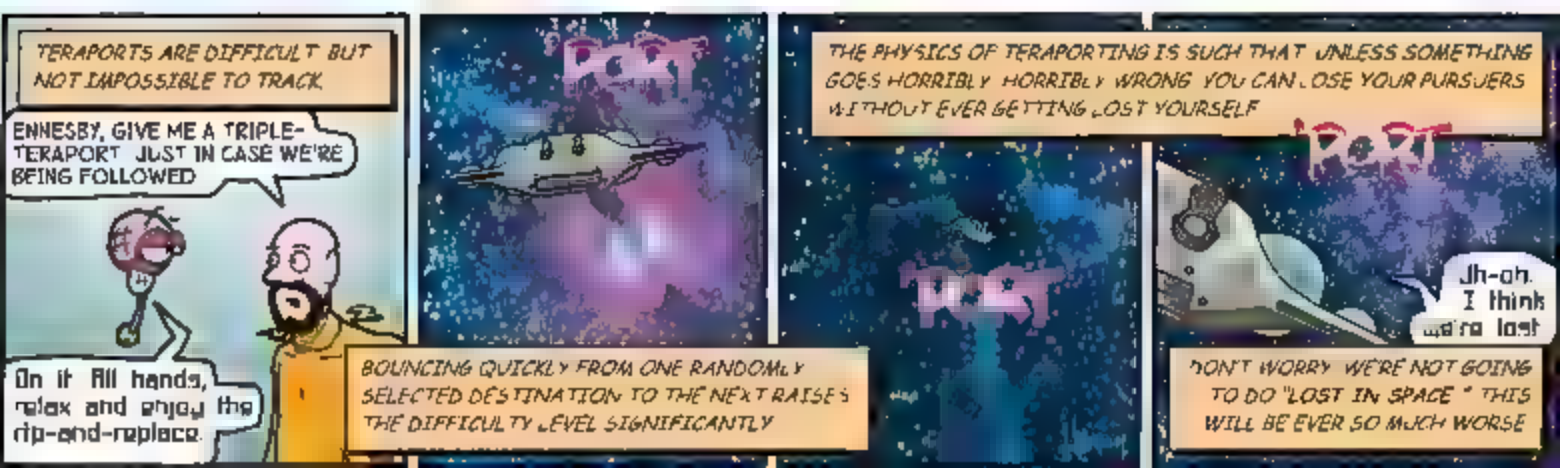

OKAY, SPILL IT. WE KNOW YOU BANGERS TRIED TO KILL GENERAL TAGON. WE ASSUME YOU WERE EITHER HERE TO TRY AGAIN OR TO KILL SOME OF US. WHICH WAS IT?
WE ONLY JUST HEARD THAT THE HIT ON THE GENERAL FAILED. WE WERE HERE FOR YOU
ME? WHY ME?
NOT YOU PERSONALLY ANY OF YOU. WE JUST NEEDED TO MAKE SURE THAT THE ASSASSINATION OF COLONEL PRANGER WASN'T PROFITABLE FOR YOUR COMPANY
GAAH! HE WASN'T ASSASSINATED! HE WAS COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN A BOTCHED ABDUCTION OF HIS EMPLOYER.
GO EASY ON THEIR EGOS. BOY THEY'RE STILL GRIEVING

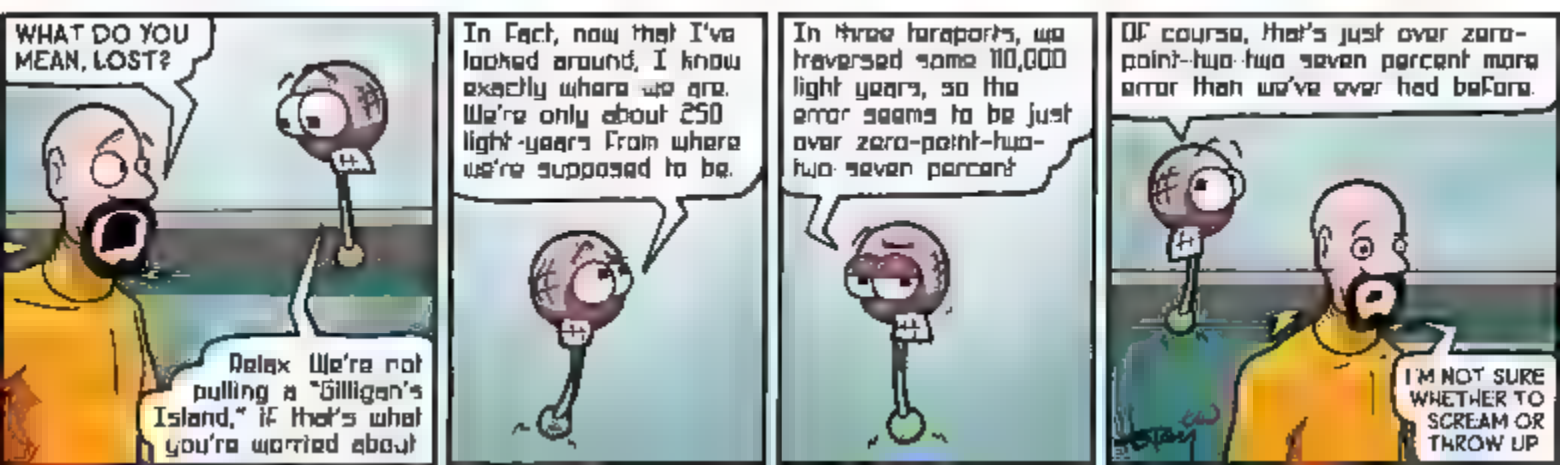

COLONEL PRANGER HAD A PRICE ON HIS HEAD FOR DECADES. IT GOT SO HIGH THE BRASS TOOK A HARD-LINE POLICY ON DEALING WITH ASSASSINS
ANY ATTEMPT ON PRANGER'S LIFE WOULD BE ANSWERED IN KIND ON THE ASSASSIN, HIS FAMILY, HIS FRIENDS. WE MADE IT PUBLIC AND IT WAS A GREAT DETERRENT UNTIL YOU CAME ALONG. IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL.
WE NEVER COLLECTED A MILLICRED FOR KILLING YOUR COLONEL, AND OUR CAPTAIN DIED ON THAT MISSION. I THINK WE'RE EVEN.
YOU NEVER COLLECTED? I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO, IF YOU'LL LET ME GO
MUAJAC! SHUT UP!
OKAY, NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE.

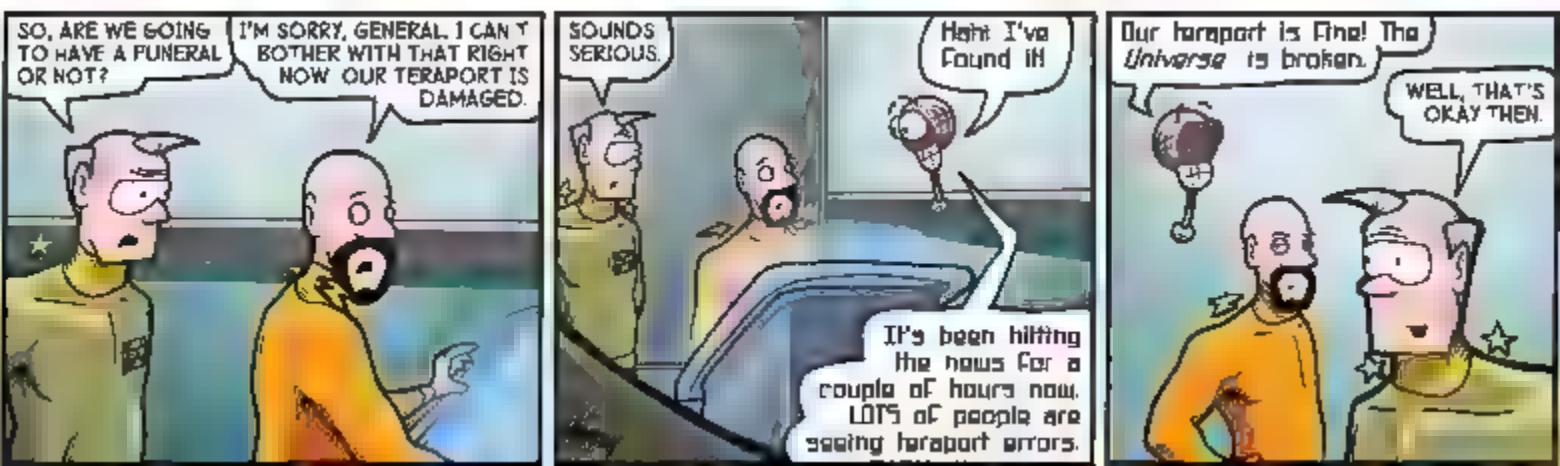

DUSTOFF IS A WELL-PRACTICED PROCEDURE IN ANY MILITARY ORGANIZATION.
WE'VE GOT EVERYBODY, CAPTAIN!
HUMANS "INVENTED" IT IN THE 20TH CENTURY BUT MILITARIES ACROSS THE GALAXY HAVE BEEN DOING IT FOR MILLENNIA
ENNESBY GET US OUT OF HERE!
IN LARGE SCALE CONFLICTS DUSTOFF IS THE EVACUATION OF WOUNDED FROM THE FIELD OF BATTLE TYPICALLY UNDER FIRE
Jiking now.
Captain, I make three police cruisers on an intercept course. Jink or scat, sir?
Schlock Mercenary

THAT ISN'T ALWAYS THE CASE. THOUGH DUSTOFF CAN ALSO BE THE "RUN" PART OF A "HIT AND-RUN" MISSION, DEPENDING ON HOW FAR AWAY YOU NEED TO RUN.
JINK. WE HAVEN'T ACTUALLY HURT ANYBODY YET. AND I'D LIKE TO KEEP IT THAT WAY.
IN A PERFECT DUSTOFF, NOBODY GETS LEFT BEHIND, ALL MATERIEL IS LOADED, AND NOBODY AT ALL GETS SHOT DOWN.
Our dance card is clear, sir. No shots fired.
(OKAY. YOU CAN SHOOT DOWN THE ENEMY. BUT IT'S A BETTER DUSTOFF IF YOU DON'T HAVE TO.

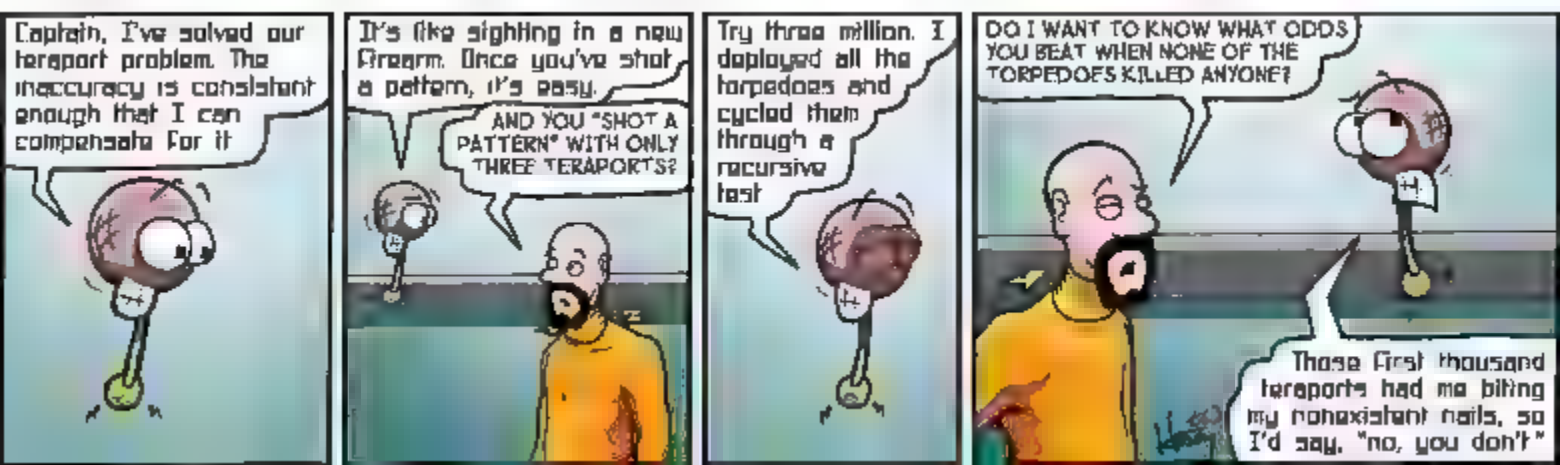

CAPTAIN ANDREYASN HAS DONE THE IMPROBABLE THE FIRST DUSTOFF UNDER HIS COMMAND HAS BEEN PERFECT
I'M IMPRESSED BOY THAT WAS A LOT MORE INTERESTING THAN THE FUNERAL WOULD HAVE BEEN.
OH! FUNERAL!!
WELL ALMOST PERFECT BUT THE COFFIN IS EMPTY AFTER ALL

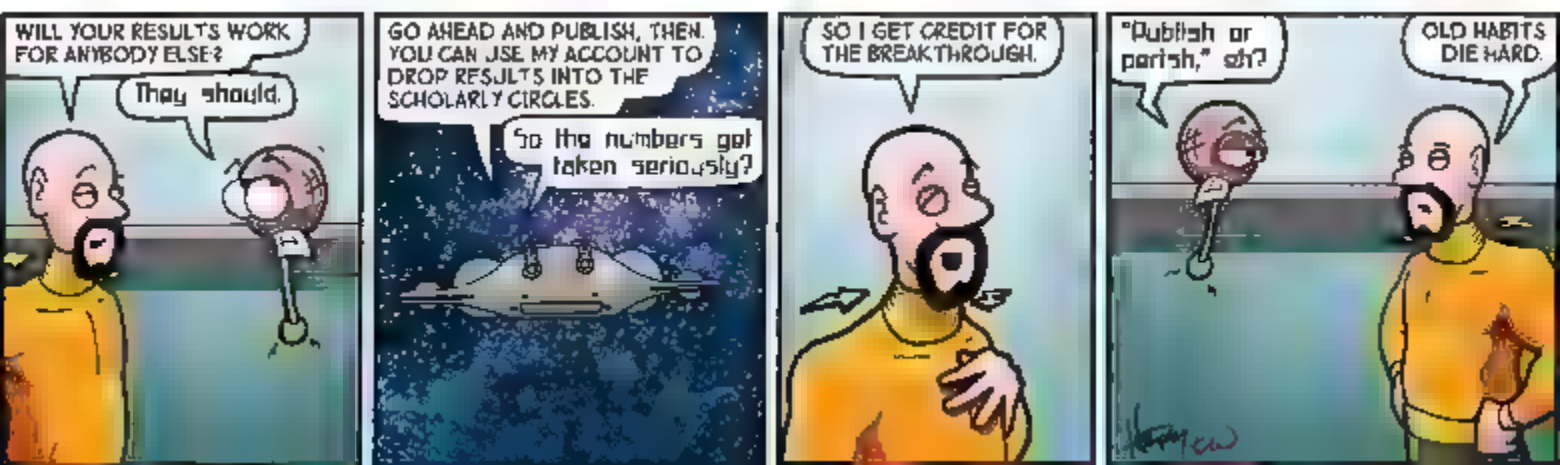

TERAPORTS ARE DIFFICULT BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE TO TRACK
ENNESBY, GIVE ME A TRIPLE-TERAPORT JUST IN CASE WE'RE BEING FOLLOWED
Oh it All hands, relax and enjoy the rip-and-replace
BOUNCING QUICKLY FROM ONE RANDOMLY SELECTED DESTINATION TO THE NEXT RAISES THE DIFFICULTY LEVEL SIGNIFICANTLY
THE PHYSICS OF TERAPORTING IS SUCH THAT UNLESS SOMETHING GOES HORRIBLY HORRIBLY WRONG YOU CAN LOSE YOUR PURSUERS WITHOUT EVER GETTING LOST YOURSELF
Uh-oh. I think we're lost
DON'T WORRY WE'RE NOT GOING TO DO "LOST IN SPACE" THIS WILL BE EVER SO MUCH WORSE


WHAT DO YOU MEAN, LOST?
Relax. We're not pulling a "Gilligan's Island," if that's what you're worried about.
In fact, now that I've looked around, I know exactly where we are. We're only about 250 light-years from where we're supposed to be.
In three hyperports, we traversed some 110,000 light years, so the error seems to be just over zero-point-two-two-seven percent.
Of course, that's just over zero-point-two-two-seven percent more error than we've ever had before.
I'M NOT SURE WHETHER TO SCREAM OR THROW UP


SO, ARE WE GOING TO HAVE A FUNERAL OR NOT?
I'M SORRY, GENERAL. I CAN'T BOTHER WITH THAT RIGHT NOW. OUR TERAPORT IS DAMAGED.
SOUNDS SERIOUS.
Hah! I've found it!
It's been hitting the news for a couple of hours now. LOTS of people are seeing teraport errors.
Our teraport is fine! The *Universe* is broken.
WELL, THAT'S OKAY THEN.

IF TERAPORTS HAVE BECOME INACCURATE THEN EITHER THE LAWS OF PHYSICS HAVE CHANGED, OR THE SHAPE OF THE UNIVERSE HAS CHANGED.
A FEW CAREFUL EXPERI
WHOA!
WHAMMO
DID ANYBODY ELSE FEEL THAT? THE UNIVERSE MAY BE MORE BROKEN THAN I SUSPECTED!
SORRY, SIR. THAT WAS SERGEANT SCHLOCK. I GAVE HIM A TUB OF OVALOWIK. HE PUT ON FORTY KILOS, AND NOW HE SEEMS INTENT ON BURNING IT OFF IN ONE GO
I GUESS THE UNIVERSE IS STILL CONSISTENT THEN.


Captain, I've solved our teraport problem. The inaccuracy is consistent enough that I can compensate for it
It's like sighting in a new firearm. Once you've shot a pattern, it's easy.
AND YOU "SHOT A PATTERN" WITH ONLY THREE TERAPORTS?
Try three million. I deployed all the torpedoes and cycled them through a recursive test
DO I WANT TO KNOW WHAT ODDS YOU BEAT WHEN NONE OF THE TORPEDOES KILLED ANYONE?
Those first thousand teraports had me biting my nonexistent nails, so I'd say, "no, you don't."

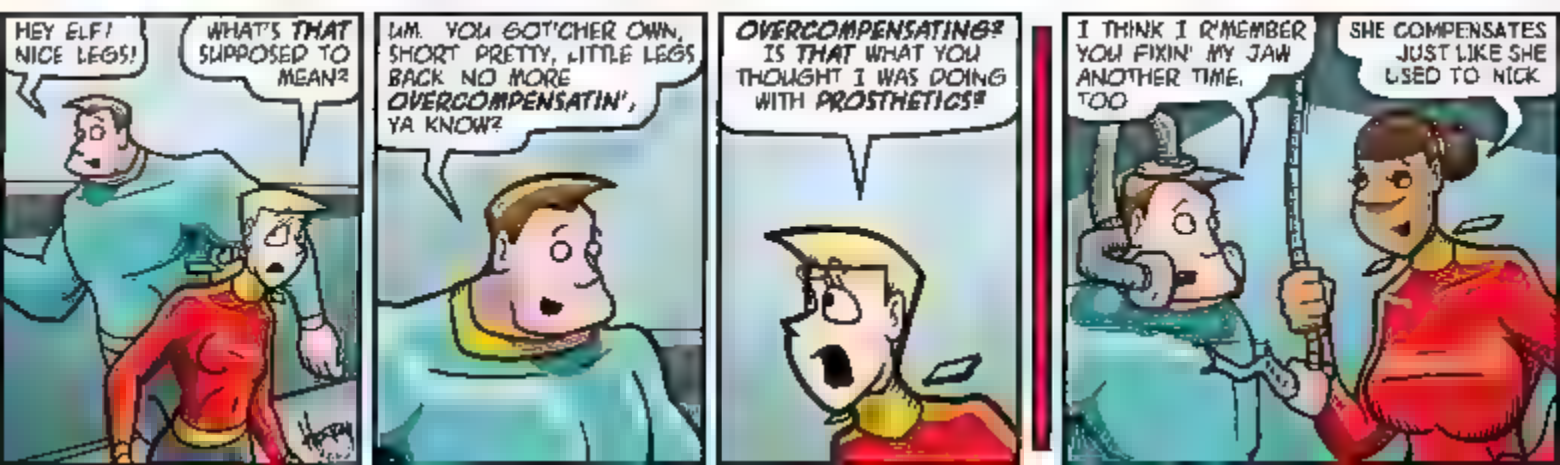

WILL YOUR RESULTS WORK FOR ANYBODY ELSE?
They should.
GO AHEAD AND PUBLISH, THEN. YOU CAN USE MY ACCOUNT TO DROP RESULTS INTO THE SCHOLARLY CIRCLES.
So the numbers get taken seriously?
SO I GET CREDIT FOR THE BREAKTHROUGH.
"Publish or perish," eh?
OLD HABITS DIE HARD.

THE WARDROOM ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER.
WE CAN 'PORT SAFELY AGAIN. OUR FIRST DESTINATION IS THE KELRIK HUB.
Schlock Mercenary
WHAT'S THERE, BESIDES SOME REALLY UPTIGHT FOODSERVICE COMMANDOS?
ACCORDING TO ONE OF OUR PRISONERS, THE HUB IS HOME TO AN ESCROW AGENCY
THIS PARTICULAR ESCROW AGENCY IS HOLDING A FAIRLY LARGE SUM OF MONEY TO BE CLAIMED BY THE PARTY OR PARTIES RESPONSIBLE FOR KILLING COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER

I FIGURE THAT AS LONG AS WE'RE GOING TO BE TREATED LIKE ASSASSINS, WE MIGHT AS WELL GET PAID FOR THE JOB
YOU KNOW, IF CAPTAIN TAGON HAD A GRAVE TO ROLL OVER IN, HE'D BE ROLLING OVER IN IT RIGHT NOW
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DER TRIHS. I NEED TO MAKE TWO THINGS VERY, *VERY* CLEAR TO YOU.

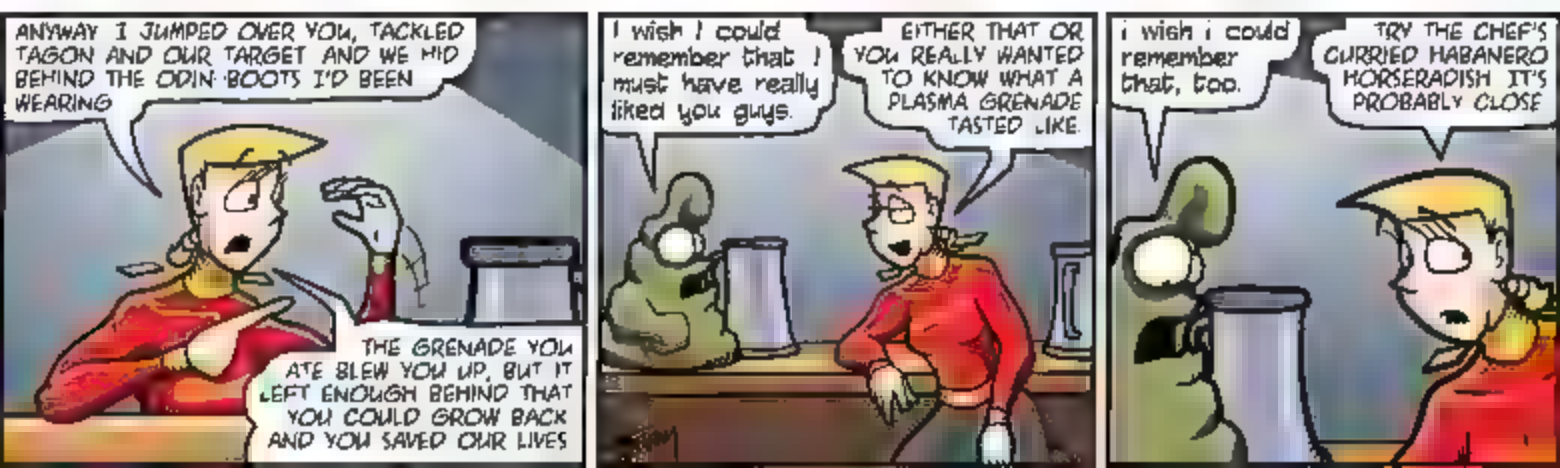
FIRST: IF YOU EVER AGAIN RESPOND TO MY ACTIONS WITH YOUR OPINION OF WHAT CAPTAIN TAGON WOULD DO IN THE SAME SITUATION, I'LL BUMP YOU DOWN TO LANCE CORPORAL SO FAST THAT YOUR EPAULETS WILL ABLATE ON THE TRIP DOWN, SAVING ME THE TROUBLE OF STRIPPING THEM FROM YOU.
(THAT'S REALLY, REALLY FAST, IN CASE YOU DIDN'T FIGURE IT OUT FROM THE SUPPLIED CONTEXT.)
SECOND: "ROLLING IN HIS GRAVE?" *ROLLING?*
HE'D BE DOING HIS HAPPY DANCE, SINGING A SONG THAT GOES "WE GOT PAID TWIIICE! WE GOT PAID TWIIICE!"
SOUNDS LIKE MY BOY ALL RIGHT

IT'S BEEN GOOD TO HAVE YOU ABOARD, GENERAL, BUT WE REALLY SHOULD DROP YOU OFF SOMEPLACE.
WHERE, EXACTLY? MY *HOME* IS MISSING A DOOR. AND HAS A BIG BULL'S-EYE PAINTED ON IT IN SOMEBODY'S MAP ROOM.
BESIDES, I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE UNTIL I GET THAT FUNERAL YOU PROMISED ME.
THAT CAME OUT WRONG. MY SON'S FUNERAL, NOT MINE.
OH. RIGHT. I'LL CANCEL THE EUTHANASIA.

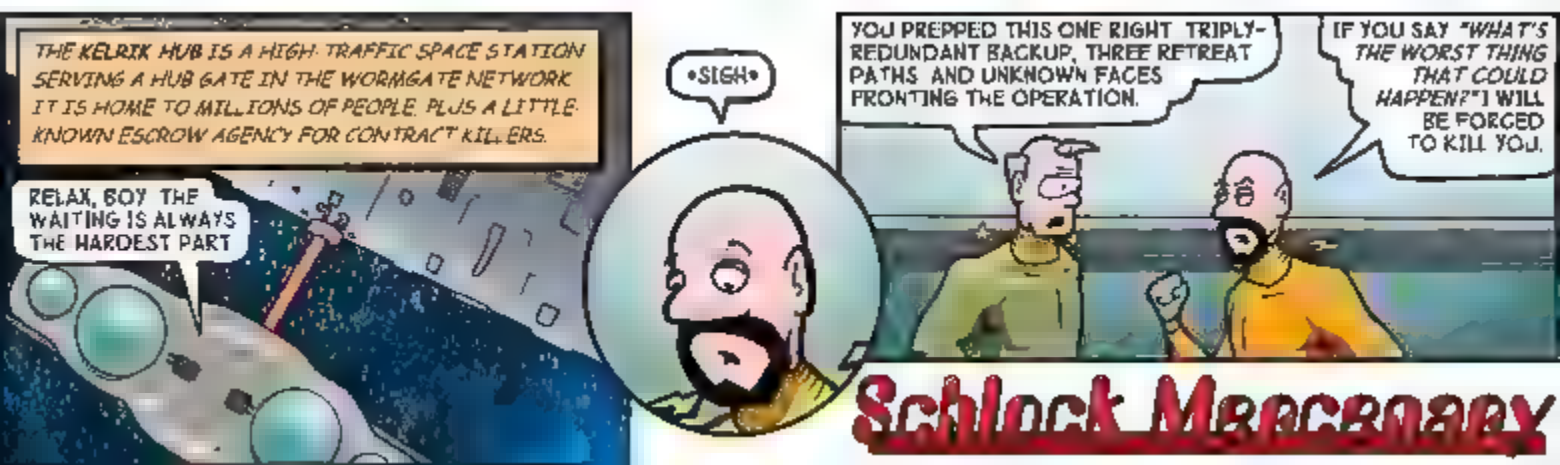

HEY ELF! NICE LEGS!
WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?
UM. YOU GOT'CHER OWN, SHORT PRETTY, LITTLE LEGS BACK NO MORE OVERCOMPENSATIN', YA KNOW?
OVERCOMPENSATING? IS THAT WHAT YOU THOUGHT I WAS DOING WITH PROSTHETICS?
I THINK I R'MEMBER YOU FIXIN' MY JAW ANOTHER TIME, TOO
SHE COMPENSATES JUST LIKE SHE USED TO NICK.

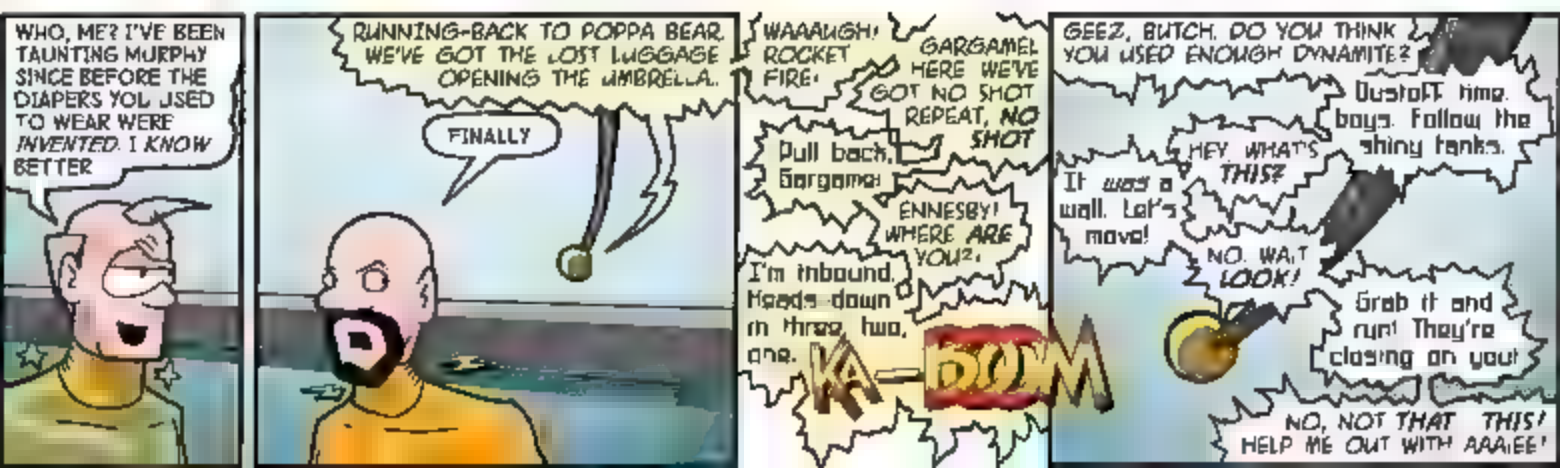
Hey, you're the nice lady with just a head! Elf, right?
YEAH, SCHLOCK, THAT'S ME
SIGH
YOU SAVED MY LIFE, YOU KNOW IT'S NOT FAIR THAT YOU DON'T GET TO REMEMBER THAT
Well, I'll remember you telling me about it. It sounds like a good story.
IT'S A GREAT STORY, BUT IT NEEDS DRINKS, AND A BIGGER CROWD
Oooh! Ovalqwik is a drink!

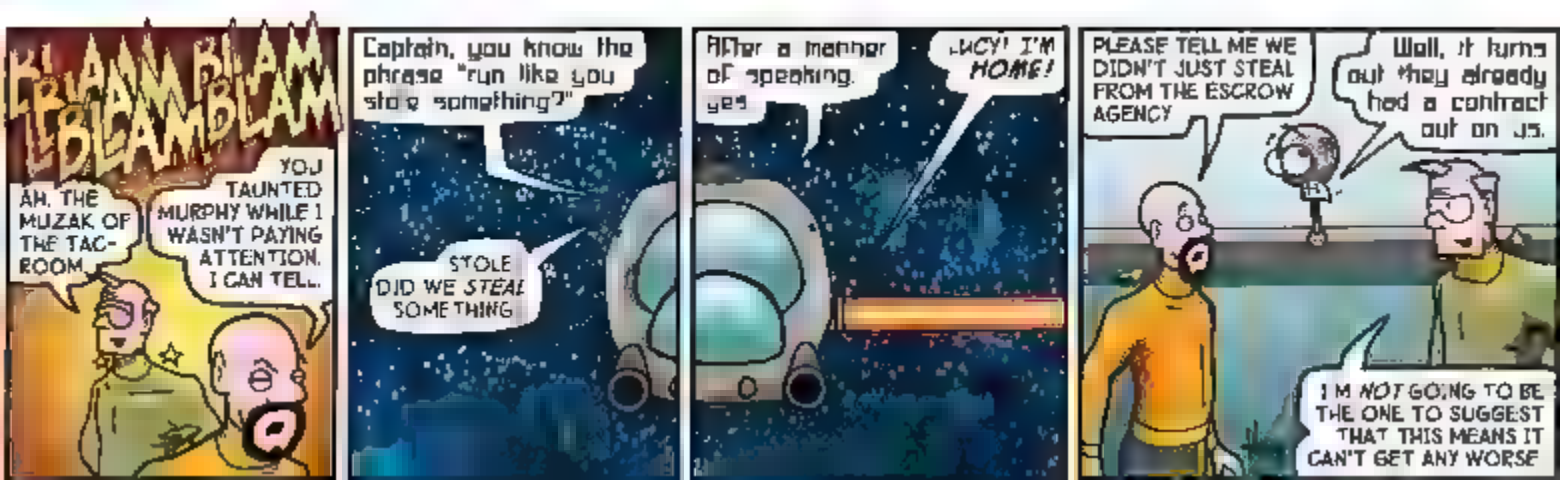
.. SO THIS DEAD GUY ISN'T DEAD THE POSSUM PITCHES A GRENADE RIGHT INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM.
I THOUGHT IT WAS OVER. THE ROOM WASN'T BIG ENOUGH TO TAKE COVER IN, AND THE GRENADE WAS GONNA LAND BETWEEN ME AN' THE DOOR. I JUST KNEW I WAS GONNA DIE BURNING.
THEN YOU ATE T
And then you knew that I'd saved you all?
WELL, NO THEN I THOUGHT THAT I WAS GONNA DIE BURNING AND COVERED IN BURNING CRAP
Somebody crapped? I don't get it

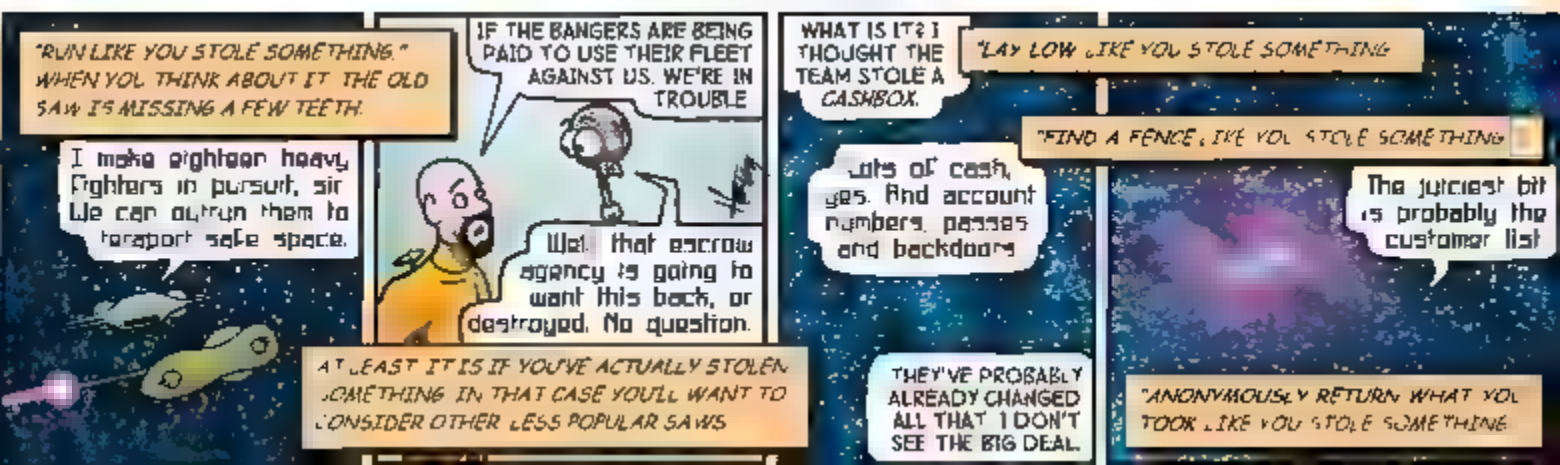

ANYWAY I JUMPED OVER YOU, TACKLED TAGON AND OUR TARGET AND WE HID BEHIND THE ODIN BOOTS I'D BEEN WEARING
THE GRENADE YOU ATE BLEW YOU UP, BUT IT LEFT ENOUGH BEHIND THAT YOU COULD GROW BACK AND YOU SAVED OUR LIVES
I wish I could remember that I must have really liked you guys.
EITHER THAT OR YOU REALLY WANTED TO KNOW WHAT A PLASMA GRENADE TASTED LIKE.
I wish I could remember that, too.
TRY THE CHEF'S CURRIED HABANERO HORSERADISH IT'S PROBABLY CLOSE

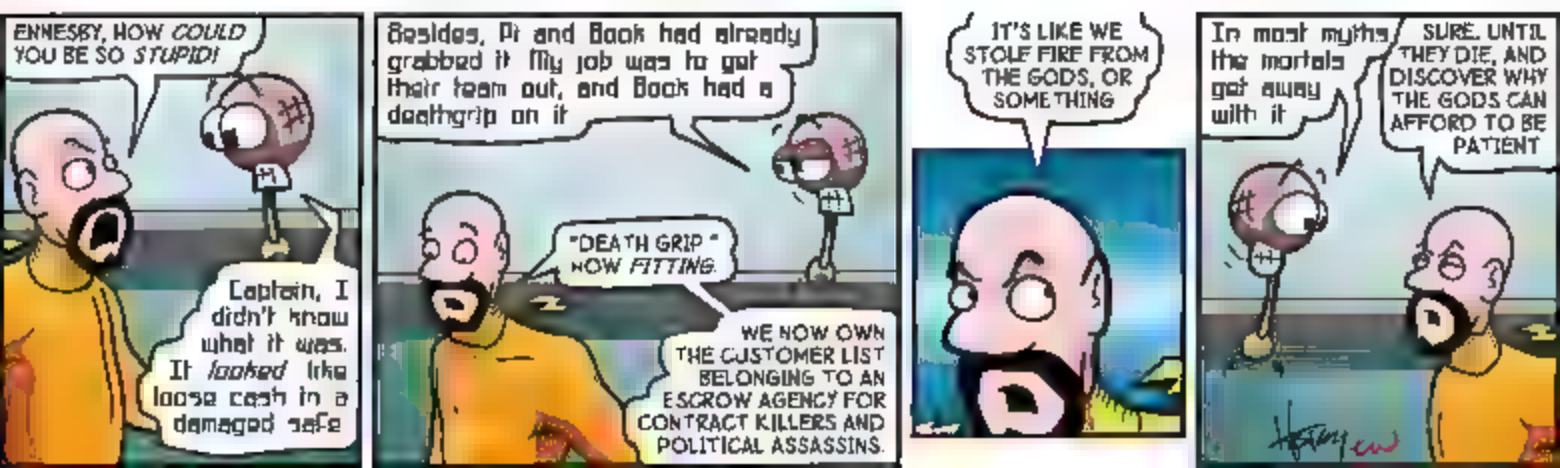
LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY?
THAT'S ME HEY YOU'RE TAGON'S DAD, HUH?
SOMEBODY SAID YOU WERE IN THE MESS TELLING STORIES ON MY BOY
UM, YEAH. I WAS THERE ON THAT LAST OP WITH HIM. I'M SORRY
YOU SHOULD BE.
YOU STARTED WITHOUT ME. NOW YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TELL THE WHOLE THING OVER FROM THE BEGINNING.
When she gets to the part about the curried habanero horseradish, don't try any.

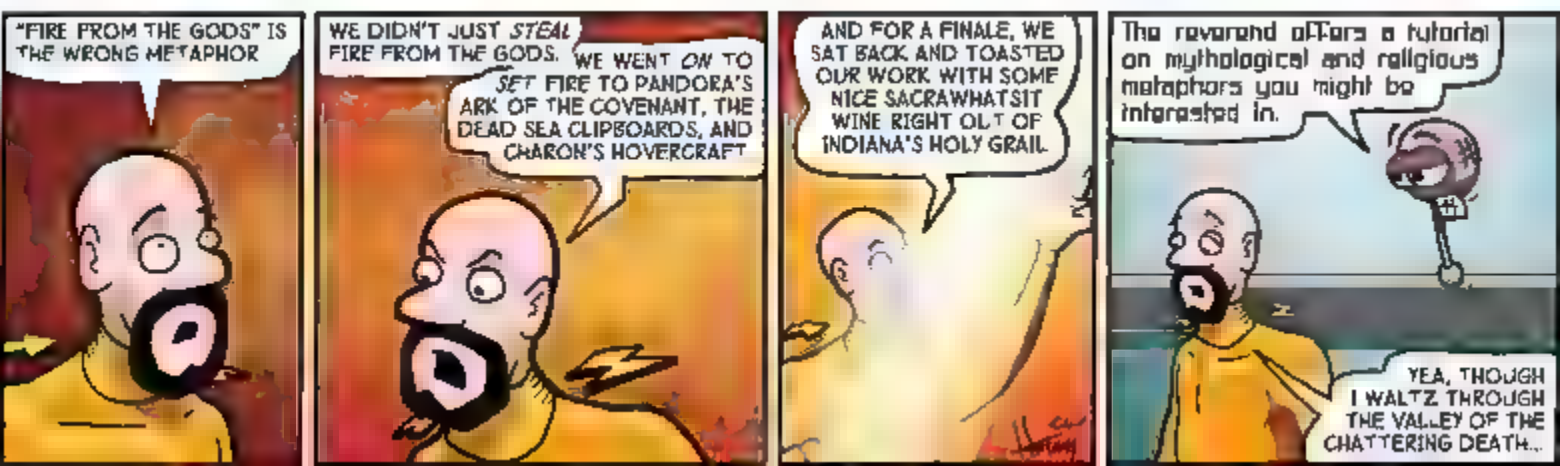

THE KELRIK HUB IS A HIGH-TRAFFIC SPACE STATION SERVING A HUB GATE IN THE WORMGATE NETWORK. IT IS HOME TO MILLIONS OF PEOPLE. PLUS A LITTLE-KNOWN ESCROW AGENCY FOR CONTRACT KILLERS.
RELAX, BOY. THE WAITING IS ALWAYS THE HARDEST PART.
•SIGH•
YOU PREPPED THIS ONE RIGHT. TRIPLY-REDUNDANT BACKUP, THREE RETREAT PATHS, AND UNKNOWN FACES FRONTING THE OPERATION.
IF YOU SAY "WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN?" I WILL BE FORCED TO KILL YOU.
Schlock Mercenary

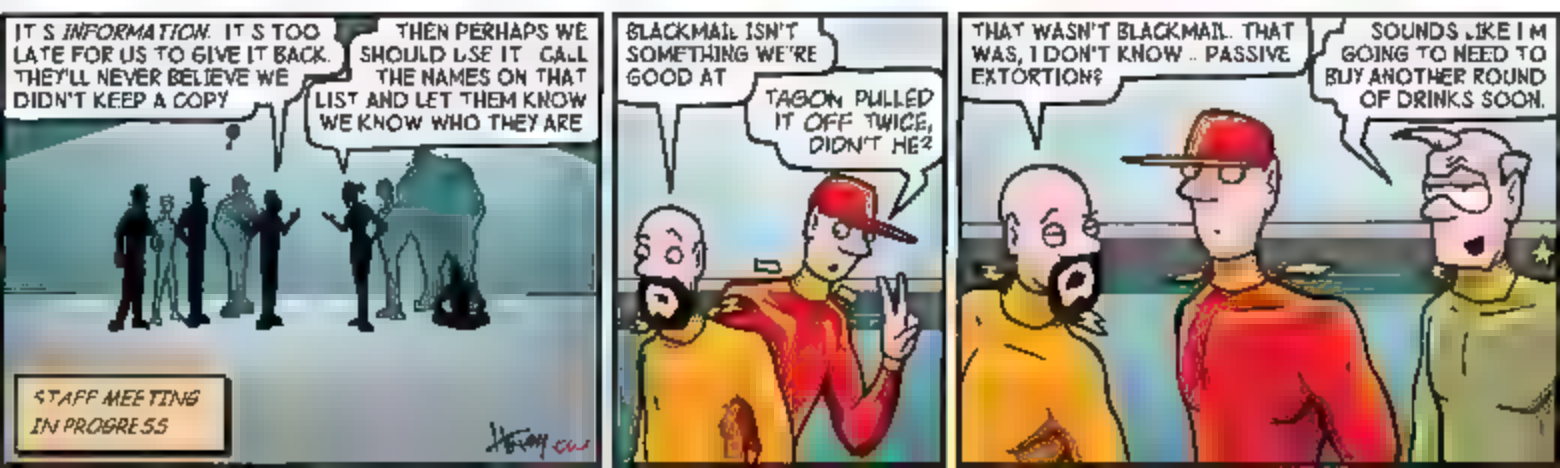

WHO, ME? I'VE BEEN TAUNTING MURPHY SINCE BEFORE THE DIAPERS YOU USED TO WEAR WERE *INVENTED*. I *KNOW* BETTER
RUNNING-BACK TO POPPA BEAR. WE'VE GOT THE LOST LUGGAGE OPENING THE UMBRELLA.
FINALLY
WAAAUGH! ROCKET FIRE!
GARGAMEL HERE WE'VE GOT NO SHOT REPEAT, *NO SHOT*
Pull back, Gargamel!
ENNESBY! WHERE *ARE* YOU?
I'm inbound. Heads down in three, two, one.
KA-BOOM
GEEZ, BUTCH. DO YOU THINK YOU USED ENOUGH DYNAMITE?
Dustoff time, boys. Follow the shiny tanks.
HEY, WHAT'S *THIS?*
It *was* a wall. Let's move!
NO, WAIT *LOOK!*
Grab it and run! They're closing on you!
NO, NOT *THAT* THIS! HELP ME OUT WITH AAAIEE!


BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM
AH, THE MUZAK OF THE TAC-ROOM.
YOU TAUNTED MURPHY WHILE I WASN'T PAYING ATTENTION. I CAN TELL.
Captain, you know the phrase "run like you stole something?"
STOLE DID WE STEAL SOMETHING
After a manner of speaking, yes.
LUCY! I'M HOME!
PLEASE TELL ME WE DIDN'T JUST STEAL FROM THE ESCROW AGENCY
Well, it turns out they already had a contract out on us.
I'M NOT GOING TO BE THE ONE TO SUGGEST THAT THIS MEANS IT CAN'T GET ANY WORSE

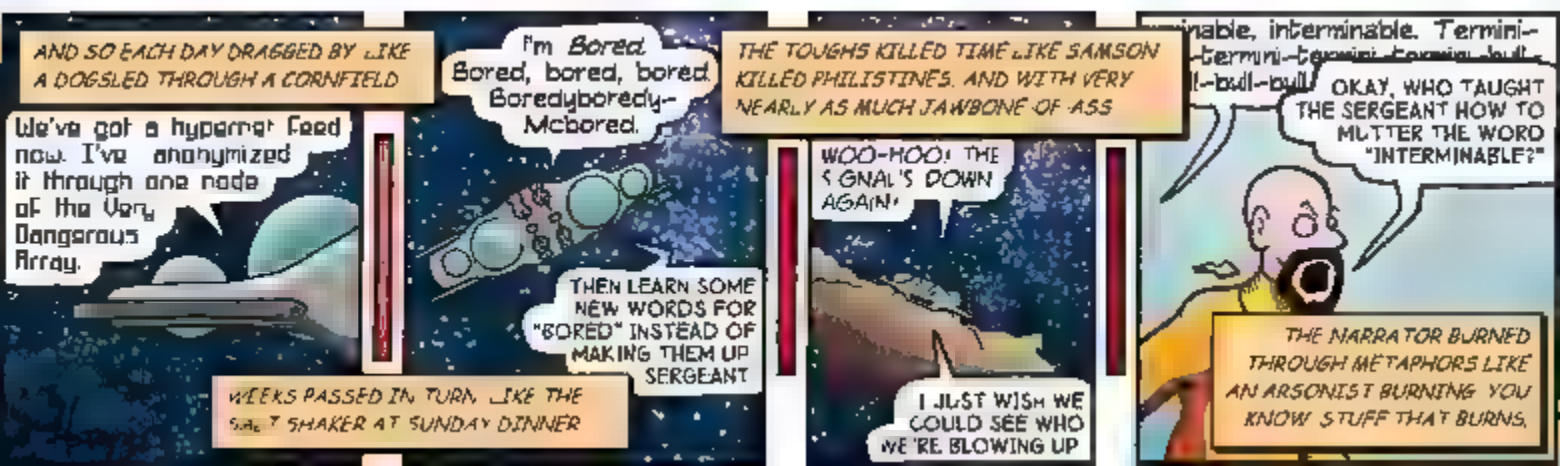

"RUN LIKE YOU STOLE SOMETHING." WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT THE OLD SAW IS MISSING A FEW TEETH.
I make eighteen heavy fighters in pursuit, sir. We can outrun them to teraport safe space.
IF THE BANGERS ARE BEING PAID TO USE THEIR FLEET AGAINST US, WE'RE IN TROUBLE
Wait. that escrow agency is going to want this back, or destroyed. No question.
AT LEAST IT IS IF YOU'VE ACTUALLY STOLEN SOMETHING IN THAT CASE YOU'LL WANT TO CONSIDER OTHER LESS POPULAR SAWS
WHAT IS IT? I THOUGHT THE TEAM STOLE A CASHBOX.
"LAY LOW LIKE YOU STOLE SOMETHING
"FIND A FENCE LIKE YOU STOLE SOMETHING
Lots of cash, gas. And account numbers, passes and backdoors
The juiciest bit is probably the customer list
THEY'VE PROBABLY ALREADY CHANGED ALL THAT I DON'T SEE THE BIG DEAL.
"ANONYMOUSLY RETURN WHAT YOU TOOK LIKE YOU STOLE SOMETHING

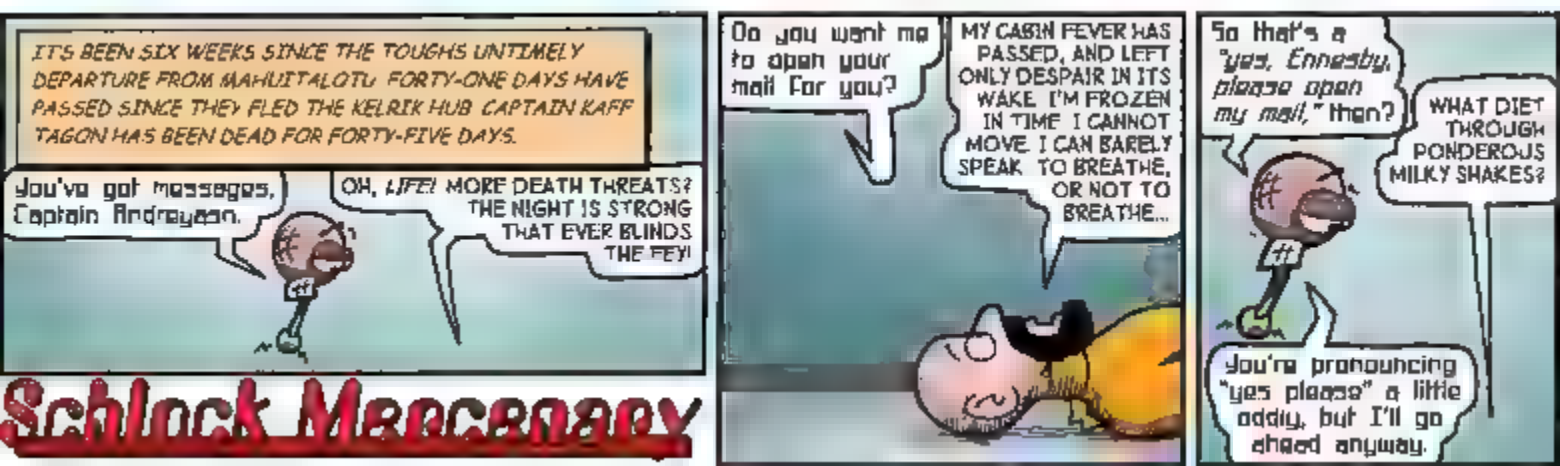

ENNESBY, HOW COULD YOU BE SO STUPID!
Captain, I didn't know what it was. It looked like loose cash in a damaged safe
Besides, Pi and Book had already grabbed it. My job was to get their team out, and Book had a deathgrip on it
"DEATH GRIP" NOW FITTING.
WE NOW OWN THE CUSTOMER LIST BELONGING TO AN ESCROW AGENCY FOR CONTRACT KILLERS AND POLITICAL ASSASSINS.
IT'S LIKE WE STOLE FIRE FROM THE GODS, OR SOMETHING
In most myths the mortals get away with it
SURE. UNTIL THEY DIE, AND DISCOVER WHY THE GODS CAN AFFORD TO BE PATIENT

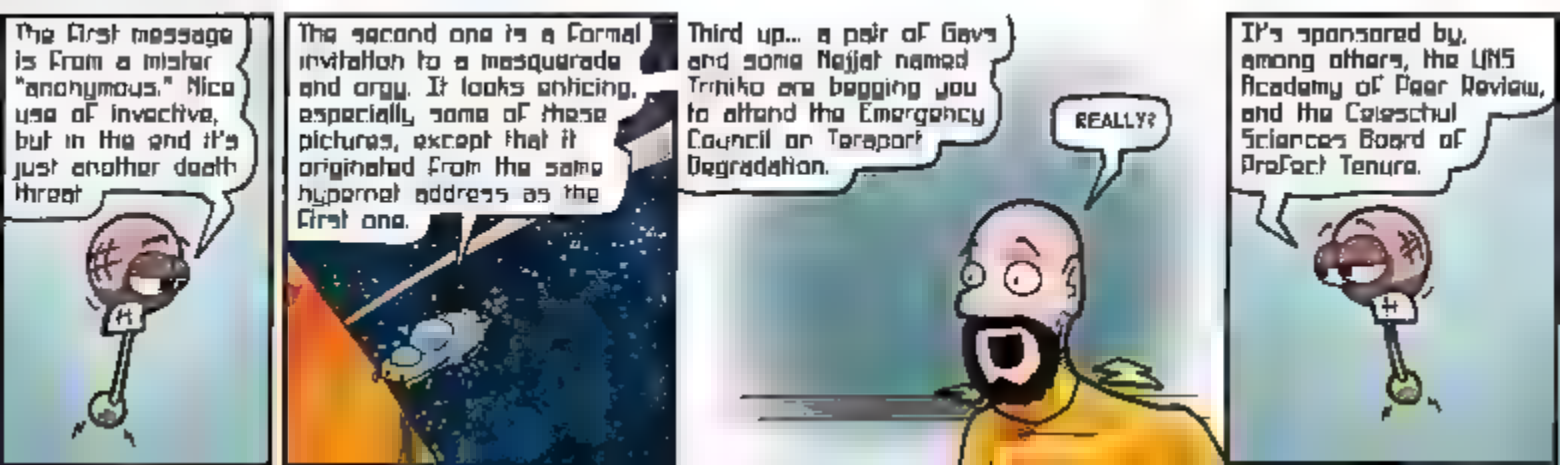

"FIRE FROM THE GODS" IS THE WRONG METAPHOR
WE DIDN'T JUST STEAL FIRE FROM THE GODS.
WE WENT ON TO SET FIRE TO PANDORA'S ARK OF THE COVENANT, THE DEAD SEA CLIPBOARDS, AND CHARON'S HOVERCRAFT
AND FOR A FINALE, WE SAT BACK AND TOASTED OUR WORK WITH SOME NICE SACRAWHATSIT WINE RIGHT OUT OF INDIANA'S HOLY GRAIL
The reverend offers a tutorial on mythological and religious metaphors you might be interested in.
YEA, THOUGH I WALTZ THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE CHATTERING DEATH...


IT S INFORMATION. IT S TOO LATE FOR US TO GIVE IT BACK. THEY'LL NEVER BELIEVE WE DIDN'T KEEP A COPY
THEN PERHAPS WE SHOULD USE IT CALL THE NAMES ON THAT LIST AND LET THEM KNOW WE KNOW WHO THEY ARE
STAFF MEETING IN PROGRESS
BLACKMAIL ISN'T SOMETHING WE'RE GOOD AT
TAGON PULLED IT OFF TWICE, DIDN'T HE?
THAT WASN'T BLACKMAIL. THAT WAS, I DON'T KNOW .. PASSIVE EXTORTION?
SOUNDS LIKE I M GOING TO NEED TO BUY ANOTHER ROUND OF DRINKS SOON.

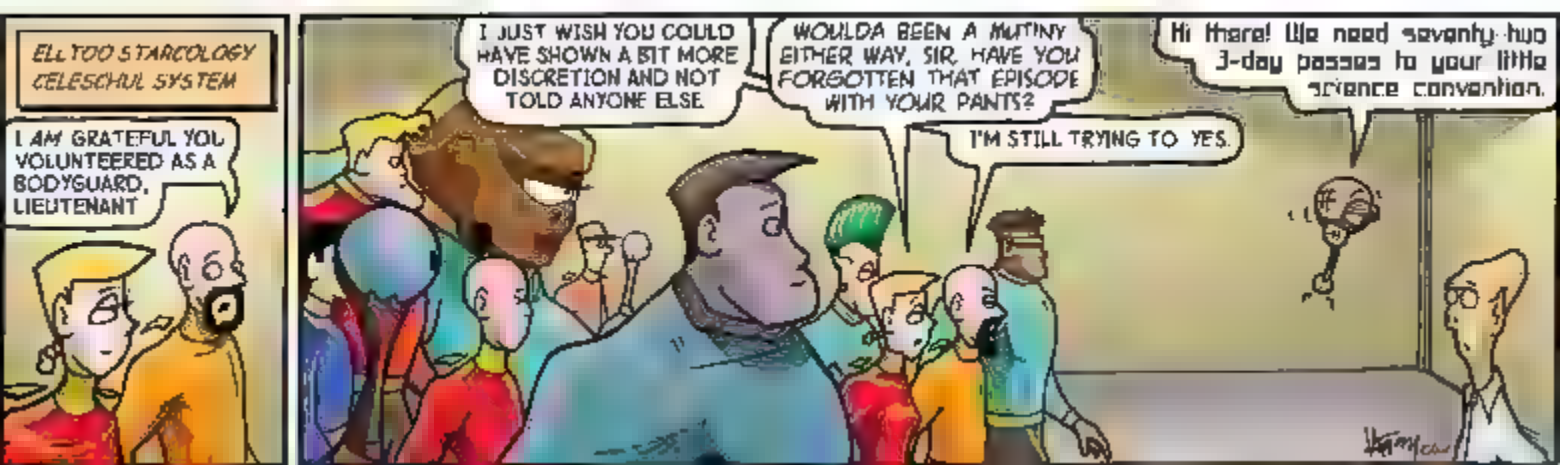
We can hide. The galaxy is a big place.
HIDE, AND WAIT
FOR HOW LONG, BOY? THESE ENEMIES YOU'VE MADE SOUND LIKE THE PATIENT TYPES.
I DON'T KNOW. MONTHS? YEARS?
That sounds really boring.
BORING, YES. BUT IT'S PRETTY EASY FROM THE NARRATOR'S STANDPOINT
"AND THE YEARS FLEW LIKE A DREAM."
OR MAYBE "THE DAYS SPED BY LIKE TEENAGE DRIVERS."
OOH! I'VE GOT IT!
"TIME PASSED LIKE FRIDAY NIGHT'S BEER ON SATURDAY MORNING"

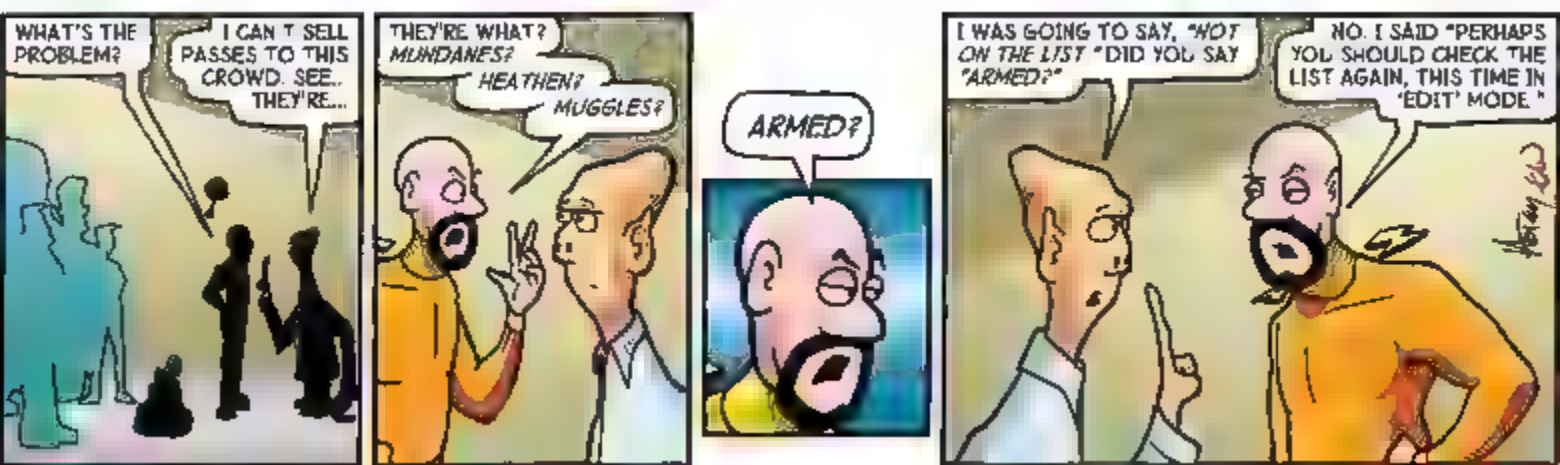

AND SO EACH DAY DRAGGED BY LIKE A DOGSLED THROUGH A CORNFIELD
We've got a hyperrat feed now. I've anonymized it through one node of the Very Dangerous Array.
I'm Bored. Bored, bored, bored. Boredyboredy-Mcbored.
THEN LEARN SOME NEW WORDS FOR "BORED" INSTEAD OF MAKING THEM UP SERGEANT
WEEKS PASSED IN TURN, LIKE THE SALT SHAKER AT SUNDAY DINNER
THE TOUGHS KILLED TIME LIKE SAMSON KILLED PHILISTINES. AND WITH VERY NEARLY AS MUCH JAWBONE OF ASS
WOO-HOO! THE SIGNAL'S DOWN AGAIN!
I JUST WISH WE COULD SEE WHO WE'RE BLOWING UP
inable, interminable. Termini-
-termini-termini-termini-bull-
l-bull-bull
OKAY, WHO TAUGHT THE SERGEANT HOW TO MUTTER THE WORD "INTERMINABLE?"
THE NARRATOR BURNED THROUGH METAPHORS LIKE AN ARSONIST BURNING YOU KNOW STUFF THAT BURNS.


IT'S BEEN SIX WEEKS SINCE THE TOUGHS UNTIMELY DEPARTURE FROM MAHUITALOTU. FORTY-ONE DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE THEY FLED THE KELRIK HUB. CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON HAS BEEN DEAD FOR FORTY-FIVE DAYS.
You've got messages, Captain Andreyaan.
OH, LIFE! MORE DEATH THREATS? THE NIGHT IS STRONG THAT EVER BLINDS THE FEY!
Schlock Mercenary
Do you want me to open your mail for you?
MY CABIN FEVER HAS PASSED, AND LEFT ONLY DESPAIR IN ITS WAKE. I'M FROZEN IN TIME. I CANNOT MOVE. I CAN BARELY SPEAK. TO BREATHE, OR NOT TO BREATHE...
So that's a "yes, Ennesby, please open my mail," then?
WHAT DIET THROUGH PONDEROUS MILKY SHAKES?
You're pronouncing "yes please" a little oddly, but I'll go ahead anyway.

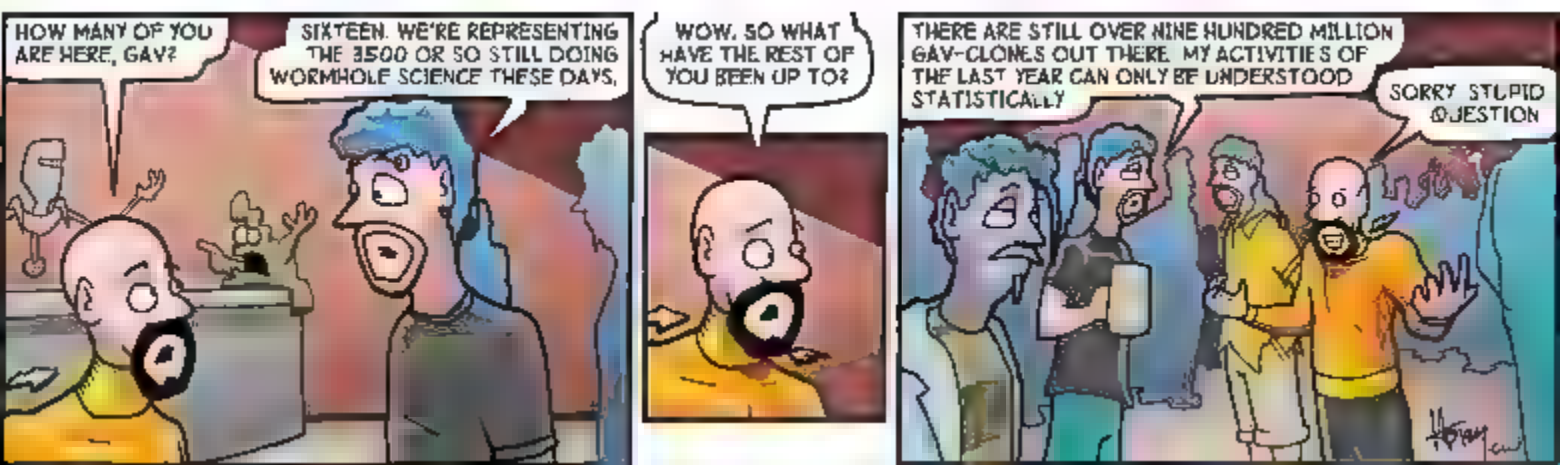

The first message is from a mister "anonymous." Nice use of invective, but in the end it's just another death threat.
The second one is a formal invitation to a masquerade and orgy. It looks enticing, especially some of these pictures, except that it originated from the same hypernet address as the first one.
Third up... a pair of Gavs and some Najjet named Tohiko are begging you to attend the Emergency Council on Teraport Degradation.
REALLY?
It's sponsored by, among others, the UNS Academy of Peer Review, and the Celestial Sciences Board of Prefect Tenure.

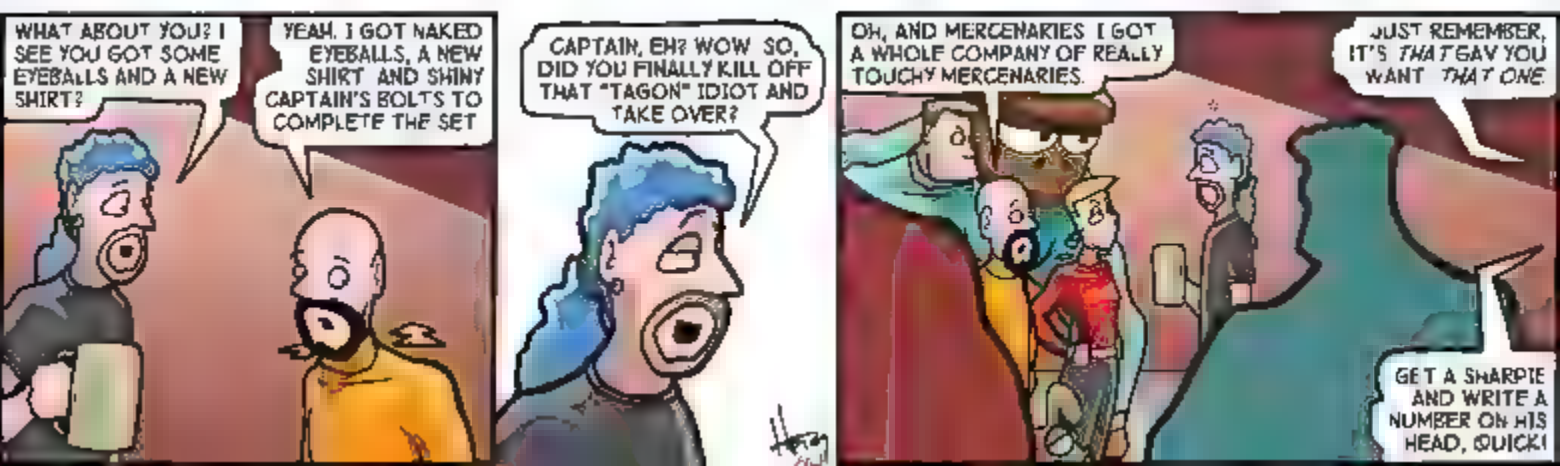
YOU'RE JUST MAKING THAT UP TO MAKE ME FEEL GOOD.
I used to *be* a boy-band, sir. I can do more convincing, more enticing fiction with half my processors recursively tied behind my back.
I'm not saying this is authentic, mind you. I'm just saying that *I* didn't make it up.
THAT'S... THAT'S FAR MORE TEMPTING THAN ANY MERE *ORGY*
...which naturally raises the question of what exactly you scientists *do* at these conventions.


ELL TOO STARCOLOGY CELESCHUL SYSTEM
I AM GRATEFUL YOU VOLUNTEERED AS A BODYGUARD, LIEUTENANT
I JUST WISH YOU COULD HAVE SHOWN A BIT MORE DISCRETION AND NOT TOLD ANYONE ELSE.
WOULDA BEEN A MUTINY EITHER WAY, SIR. HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT EPISODE WITH YOUR PANTS?
I'M STILL TRYING TO. YES.
Hi there! We need seventy-two 3-day passes to your little science convention.

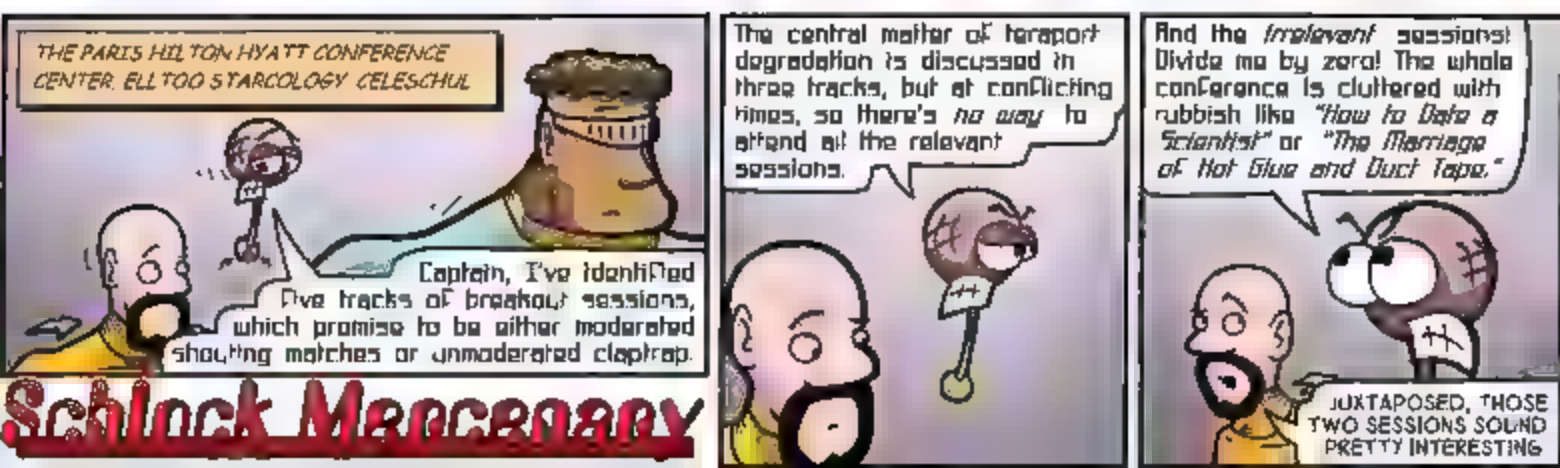

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?
I CAN'T SELL PASSES TO THIS CROWD. SEE... THEY'RE...
THEY'RE WHAT? MUNDANES?
HEATHEN?
MUGGLES?
ARMED?
I WAS GOING TO SAY, "NOT ON THE LIST." DID YOU SAY "ARMED?"
NO. I SAID "PERHAPS YOU SHOULD CHECK THE LIST AGAIN, THIS TIME IN 'EDIT' MODE."

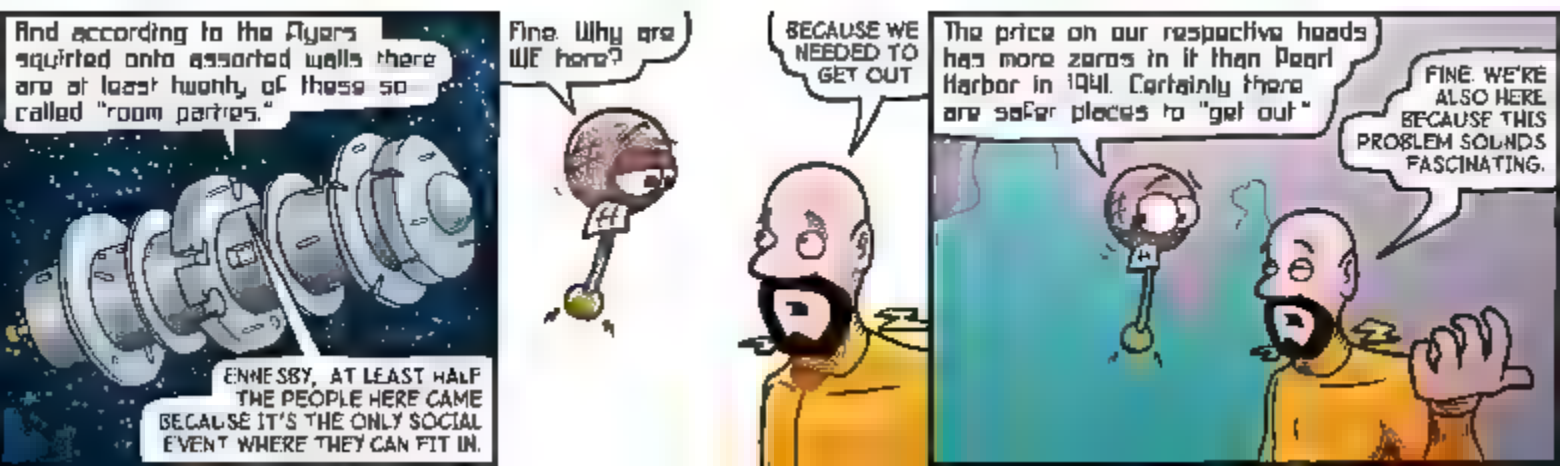
GAV! HOW ARE YOU?
ERR WOW I HOPE THE CONVENTION DOESN'T *VOTE* ON ANYTHING. YOU CAN CAST A PLURALITY ALL BY YOURSELF
HEY, COOL! CLONE HUMOR!
IT'S GOING TO BE A LONG WEEKEND
MORE GUINNESS TO THE FRONT! SOMEBODY SOUNDS STRESSED OUT, AND I THINK IT'S A ME!

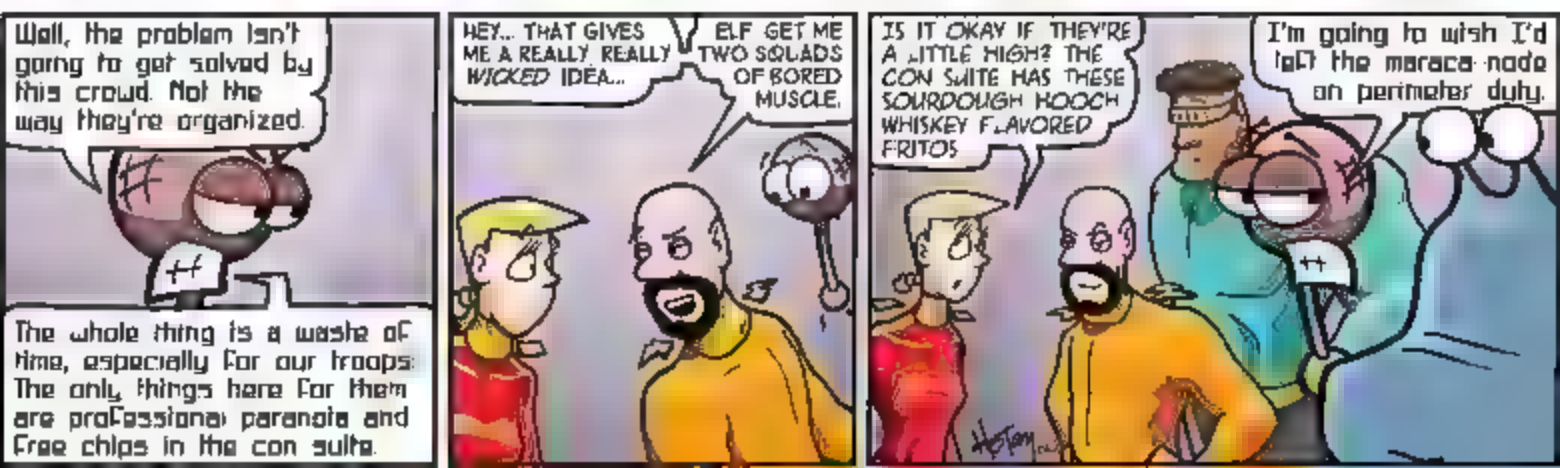

HOW MANY OF YOU ARE HERE, GAV?
SIXTEEN. WE'RE REPRESENTING THE 3500 OR SO STILL DOING WORMHOLE SCIENCE THESE DAYS.
WOW. SO WHAT HAVE THE REST OF YOU BEEN UP TO?
THERE ARE STILL OVER NINE HUNDRED MILLION GAV-CLONES OUT THERE. MY ACTIVITIES OF THE LAST YEAR CAN ONLY BE UNDERSTOOD STATISTICALLY
SORRY STUPID QUESTION

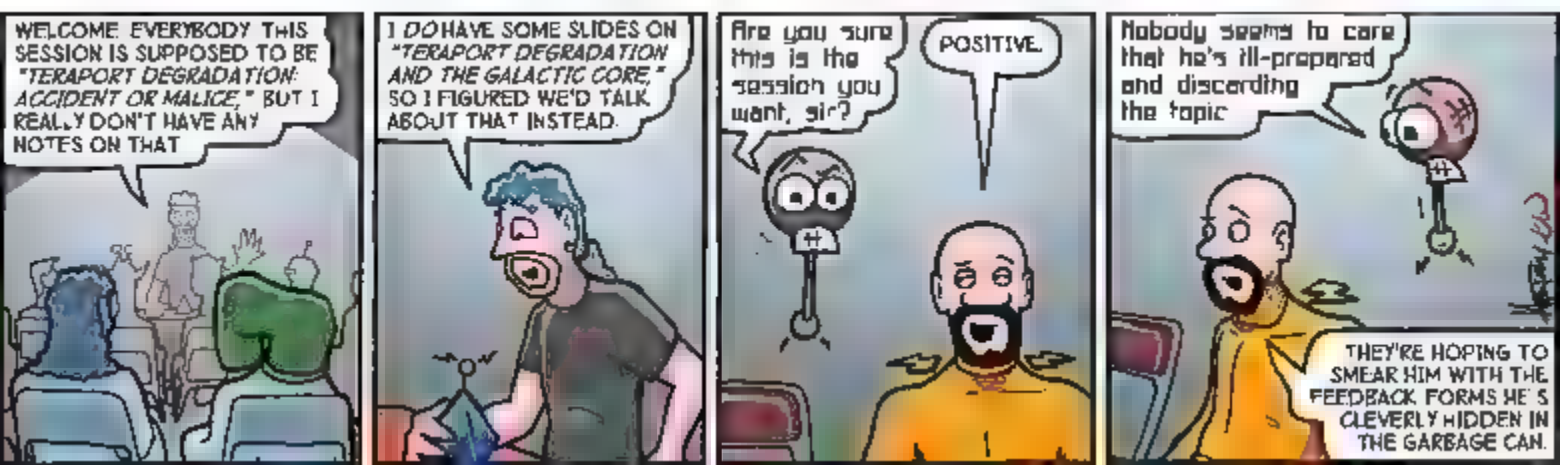

WHAT ABOUT YOU? I SEE YOU GOT SOME EYEBALLS AND A NEW SHIRT?
YEAH. I GOT NAKED EYEBALLS, A NEW SHIRT AND SHINY CAPTAIN'S BOLTS TO COMPLETE THE SET
CAPTAIN, EH? WOW SO, DID YOU FINALLY KILL OFF THAT "TAGON" IDIOT AND TAKE OVER?
OH, AND MERCENARIES I GOT A WHOLE COMPANY OF REALLY TOUCHY MERCENARIES.
JUST REMEMBER, IT'S THAT GAY YOU WANT THAT ONE
GET A SHARPIE AND WRITE A NUMBER ON HIS HEAD, QUICK!

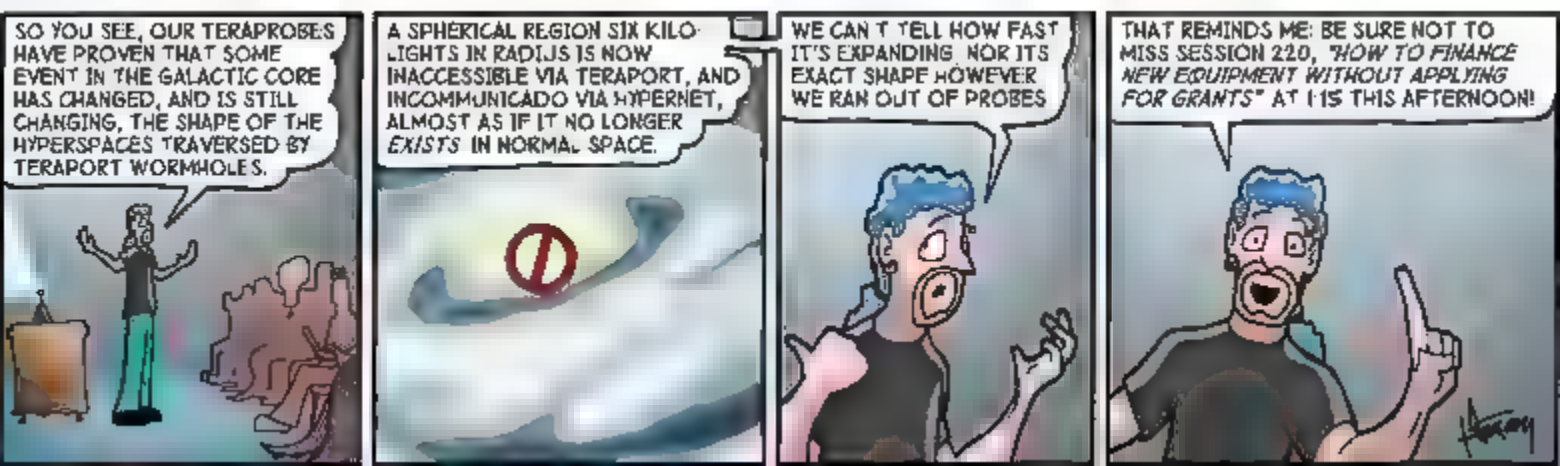
ENNESBY, TAKE THE TANKS AND THE VDA, AND GIVE US A FEW LIGHT-MINUTES OF PERIMETER.
ELF, LEGS, AND SHEP, YOU'RE WITH ME. DER TRIHS SPREAD THE REST OF THE COMPANY OUT BY SQUADS.
SEE, GAV, *THIS* TIME I'M BRINGING MY BODYGUARDS ALONG. I'M NOT GOING TO BE HELD HOSTAGE BY SOME DANGEROUS MILITARY FACTION.
UM, YEAH. I THINK RIGHT NOW YOU GUYS ARE THE *ONLY* DANGEROUS MILITARY FACTION ON THE STATION.
IT'S ALMOST RELAXING
IS *THAT* WHAT YOU CALL THIS PIT IN MY STOMACH?

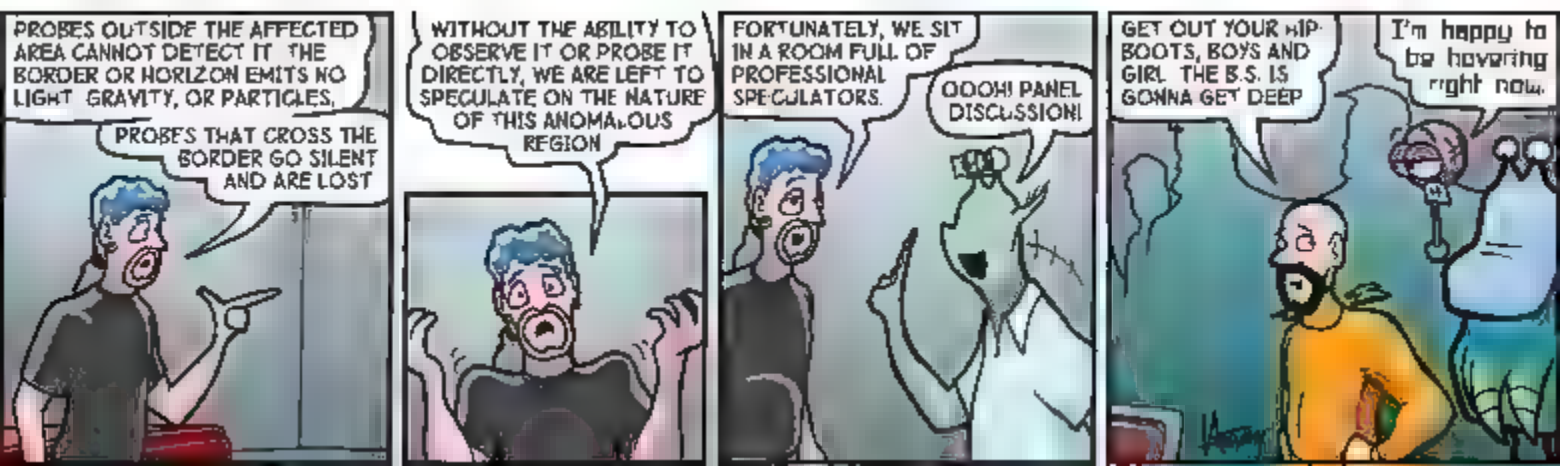

THE PARIS HILTON HYATT CONFERENCE CENTER. ELL TOO STARCOLOGY CELESCHUL
Captain, I've identified five tracks of breakout sessions, which promise to be either moderated shouting matches or unmoderated claptrap.
Schlock Mercenary
The central matter of teraport degradation is discussed in three tracks, but at conflicting times, so there's *no way* to attend all the relevant sessions.
And the *irrelevant* sessions! Divide me by zero! The whole conference is cluttered with rubbish like *"How to Date a Scientist"* or *"The Marriage of Hot Glue and Duct Tape."*
JUXTAPOSED, THOSE TWO SESSIONS SOUND PRETTY INTERESTING

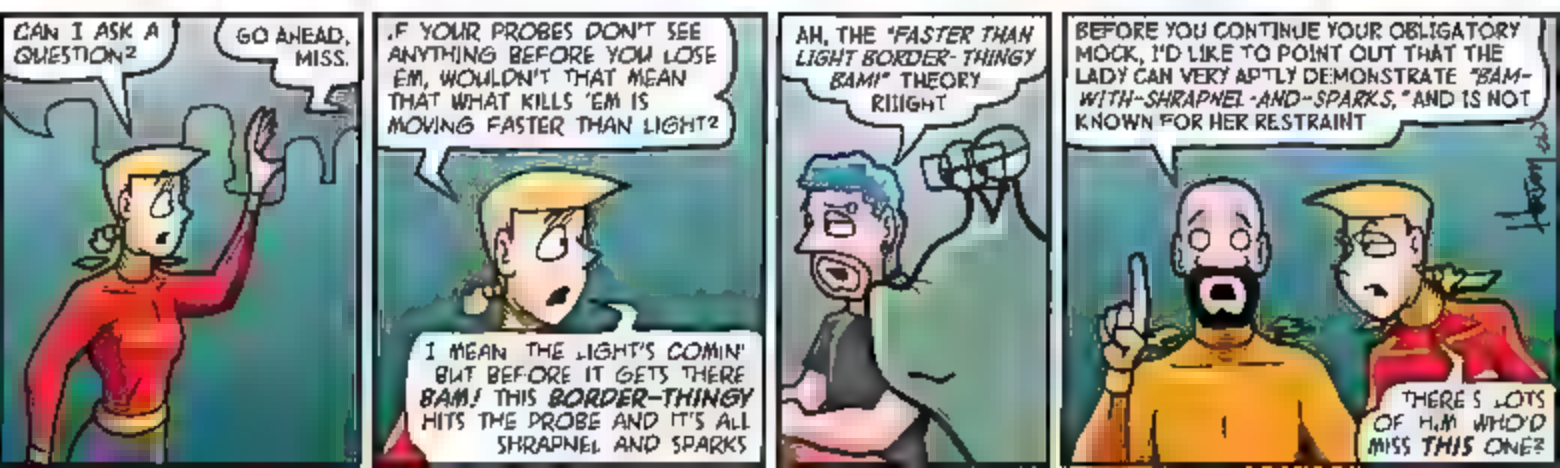

And according to the flyers squirted onto assorted walls there are at least twenty of these so-called "room parties."
ENNESBY, AT LEAST HALF THE PEOPLE HERE CAME BECAUSE IT'S THE ONLY SOCIAL EVENT WHERE THEY CAN FIT IN.
Fine. Why are WE here?
BECAUSE WE NEEDED TO GET OUT
The price on our respective heads has more zeros in it than Pearl Harbor in 1941. Certainly there are safer places to "get out."
FINE. WE'RE ALSO HERE BECAUSE THIS PROBLEM SOUNDS FASCINATING.

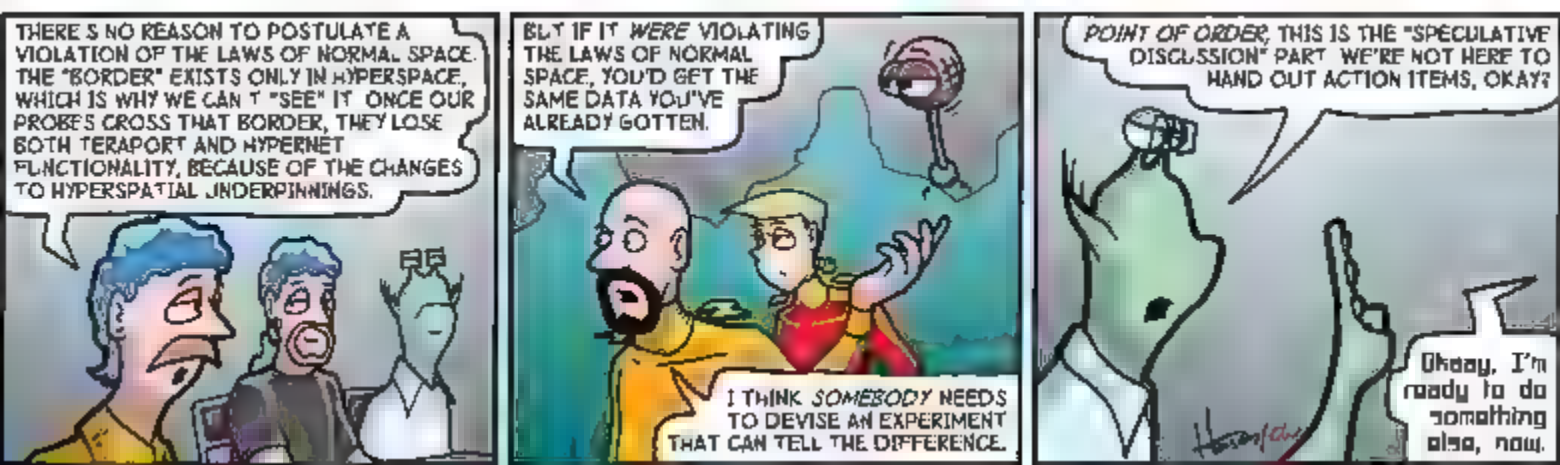

Well, the problem isn't going to get solved by this crowd. Not the way they're organized.
The whole thing is a waste of time, especially for our troops. The only things here for them are professional paranoia and free chips in the con suite.
HEY... THAT GIVES ME A REALLY REALLY WICKED IDEA...
ELF GET ME TWO SQUADS OF BORED MUSCLE.
IS IT OKAY IF THEY'RE A LITTLE HIGH? THE CON SUITE HAS THESE SOURDOUGH HOOCH WHISKEY FLAVORED FRITOS
I'm going to wish I'd left the maraca-node on perimeter duty.

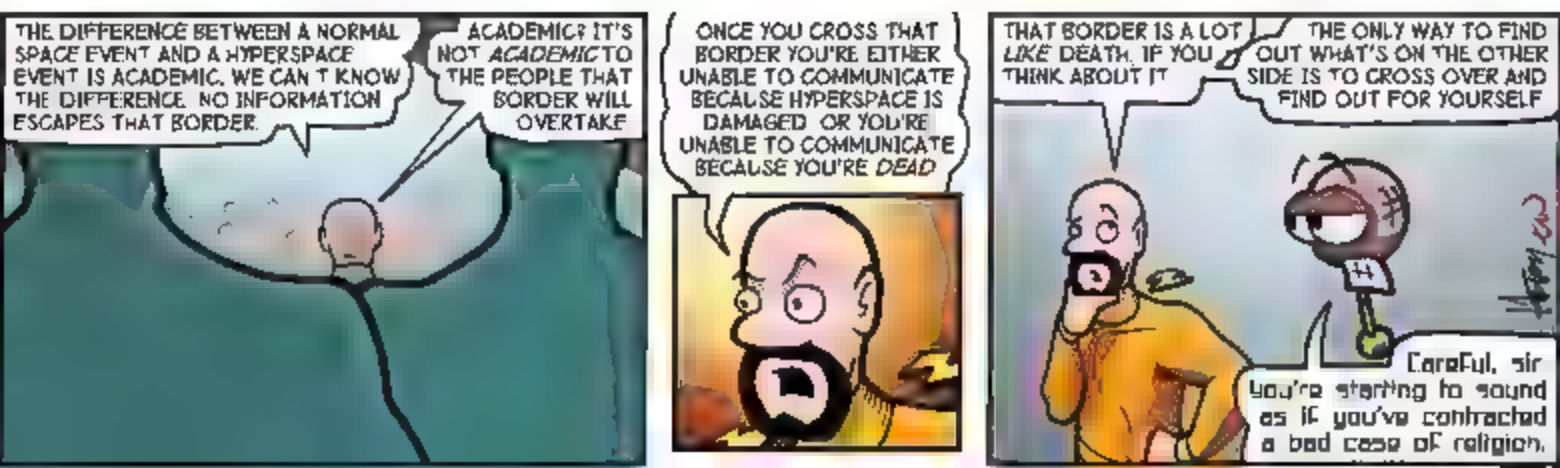

WELCOME EVERYBODY THIS SESSION IS SUPPOSED TO BE "TERAPORT DEGRADATION: ACCIDENT OR MALICE," BUT I REALLY DON'T HAVE ANY NOTES ON THAT
I DO HAVE SOME SLIDES ON "TERAPORT DEGRADATION AND THE GALACTIC CORE," SO I FIGURED WE'D TALK ABOUT THAT INSTEAD.
Are you sure this is the session you want, sir?
POSITIVE.
Nobody seems to care that he's ill-prepared and discarding the topic
THEY'RE HOPING TO SMEAR HIM WITH THE FEEDBACK FORMS HE'S CLEVERLY HIDDEN IN THE GARBAGE CAN.

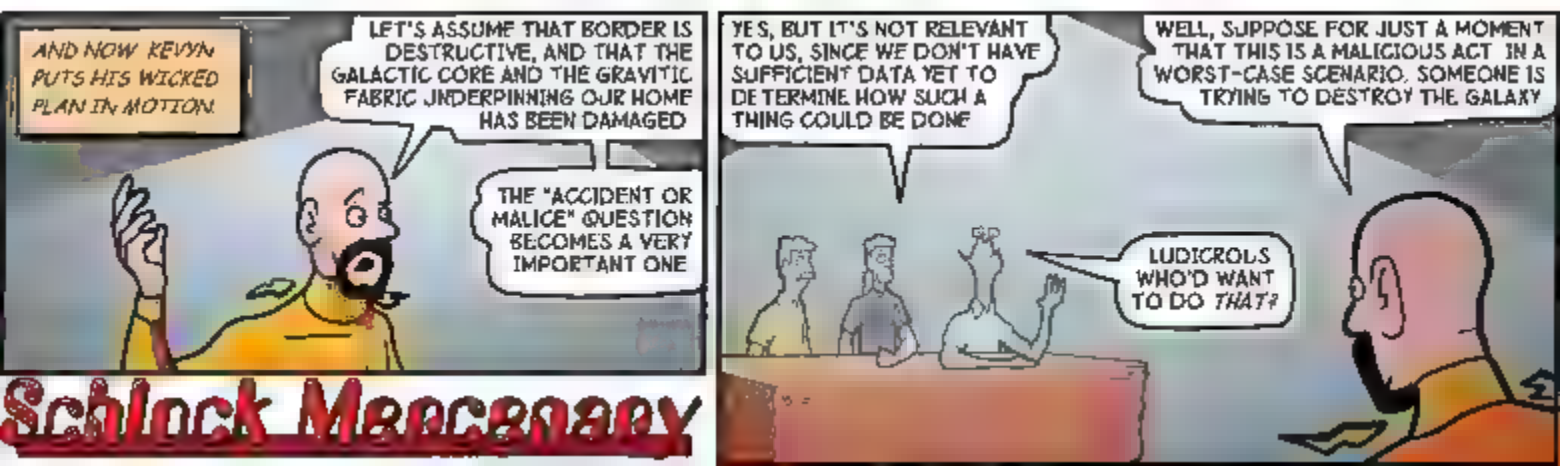

SO YOU SEE, OUR TERAPROBES HAVE PROVEN THAT SOME EVENT IN THE GALACTIC CORE HAS CHANGED, AND IS STILL CHANGING, THE SHAPE OF THE HYPERSPACES TRAVERSED BY TERAPORT WORMHOLES.
A SPHERICAL REGION SIX KILO-LIGHTS IN RADIUS IS NOW INACCESSIBLE VIA TERAPORT, AND INCOMMUNICADO VIA HYPERNET, ALMOST AS IF IT NO LONGER *EXISTS* IN NORMAL SPACE.
WE CAN'T TELL HOW FAST IT'S EXPANDING NOR ITS EXACT SHAPE HOWEVER WE RAN OUT OF PROBES
THAT REMINDS ME: BE SURE NOT TO MISS SESSION 220, *"HOW TO FINANCE NEW EQUIPMENT WITHOUT APPLYING FOR GRANTS"* AT 1:15 THIS AFTERNOON!


PROBES OUTSIDE THE AFFECTED AREA CANNOT DETECT IT. THE BORDER OR HORIZON EMITS NO LIGHT, GRAVITY, OR PARTICLES.
PROBES THAT CROSS THE BORDER GO SILENT AND ARE LOST
WITHOUT THE ABILITY TO OBSERVE IT OR PROBE IT DIRECTLY, WE ARE LEFT TO SPECULATE ON THE NATURE OF THIS ANOMALOUS REGION
FORTUNATELY, WE SIT IN A ROOM FULL OF PROFESSIONAL SPECULATORS.
OOOH! PANEL DISCUSSION!
GET OUT YOUR HIP BOOTS, BOYS AND GIRL. THE B.S. IS GONNA GET DEEP
I'm happy to be hovering right now.


CAN I ASK A QUESTION?
GO AHEAD, MISS.
.F YOUR PROBES DON'T SEE ANYTHING BEFORE YOU LOSE EM, WOULDN'T THAT MEAN THAT WHAT KILLS 'EM IS MOVING FASTER THAN LIGHT?
I MEAN THE LIGHT'S COMIN' BUT BEFORE IT GETS THERE BAM! THIS BORDER-THINGY HITS THE PROBE AND IT'S ALL SHRAPNEL AND SPARKS
AH, THE "FASTER THAN LIGHT BORDER-THINGY BAM!" THEORY
RIIIGHT
BEFORE YOU CONTINUE YOUR OBLIGATORY MOCK, I'D LIKE TO POINT OUT THAT THE LADY CAN VERY APTLY DEMONSTRATE "BAM-WITH-SHRAPNEL-AND-SPARKS," AND IS NOT KNOWN FOR HER RESTRAINT
THERE'S LOTS OF HIM WHO'D MISS THIS ONE?

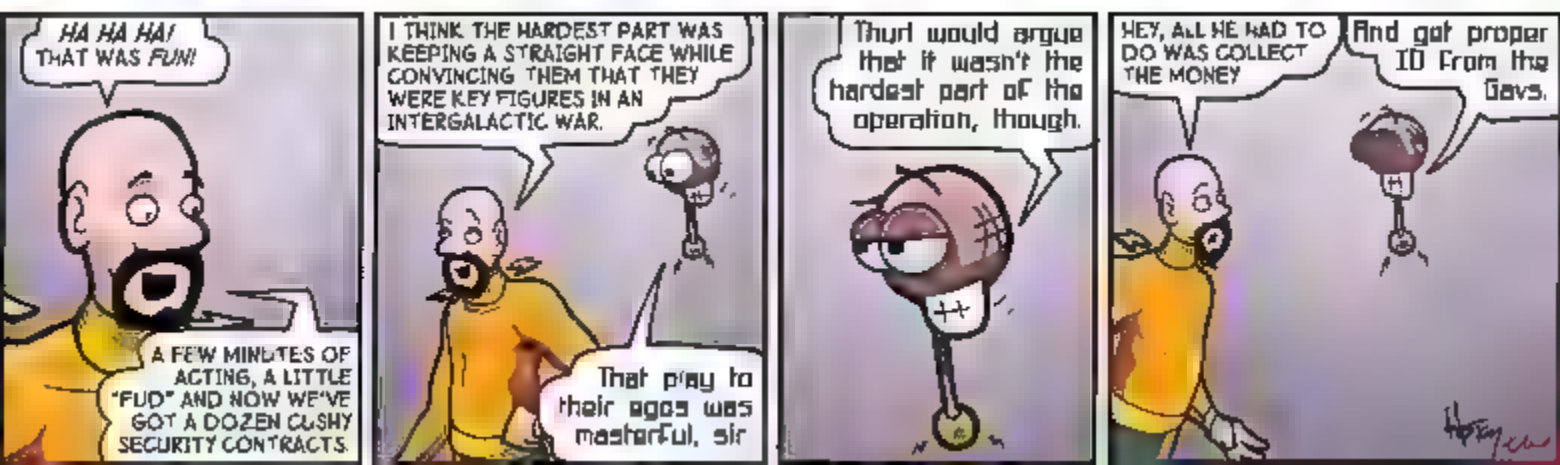

THERE'S NO REASON TO POSTULATE A VIOLATION OF THE LAWS OF NORMAL SPACE. THE "BORDER" EXISTS ONLY IN HYPERSPACE, WHICH IS WHY WE CAN'T "SEE" IT. ONCE OUR PROBES CROSS THAT BORDER, THEY LOSE BOTH TERAPORT AND HYPERNET FUNCTIONALITY, BECAUSE OF THE CHANGES TO HYPERSPATIAL UNDERPINNINGS.
BUT IF IT *WERE* VIOLATING THE LAWS OF NORMAL SPACE, YOU'D GET THE SAME DATA YOU'VE ALREADY GOTTEN.
I THINK *SOMEBODY* NEEDS TO DEVISE AN EXPERIMENT THAT CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE.
POINT OF ORDER, THIS IS THE "SPECULATIVE DISCUSSION" PART. WE'RE NOT HERE TO HAND OUT ACTION ITEMS, OKAY?
Okay, I'm ready to do something else, now.

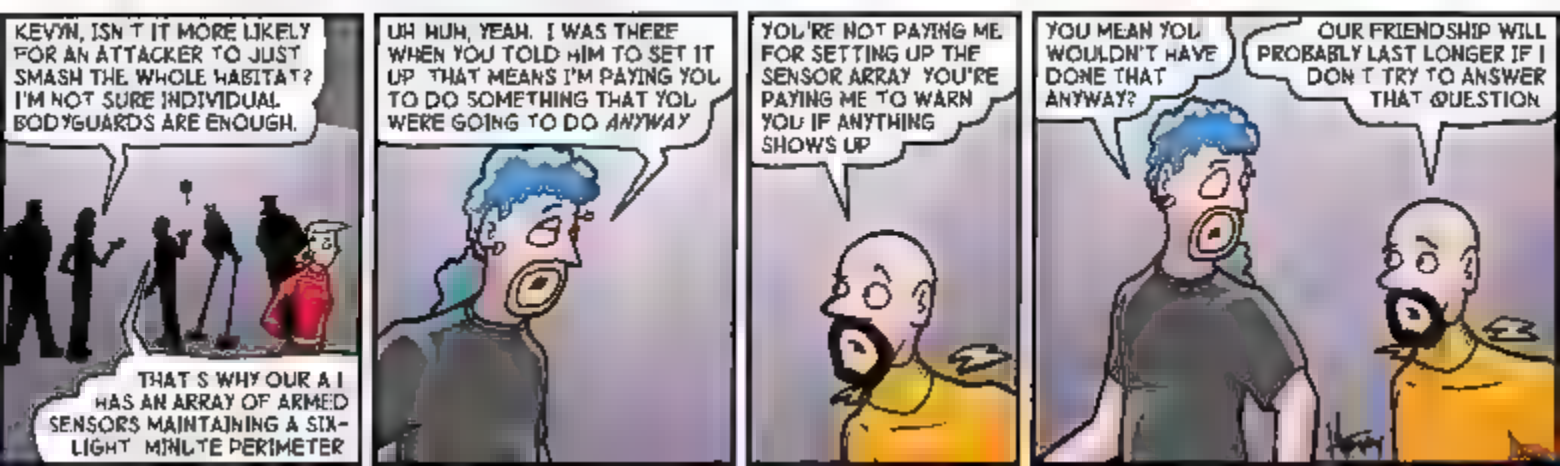

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A NORMAL SPACE EVENT AND A HYPERSPACE EVENT IS ACADEMIC. WE CAN'T KNOW THE DIFFERENCE. NO INFORMATION ESCAPES THAT BORDER.
ACADEMIC? IT'S NOT *ACADEMIC* TO THE PEOPLE THAT BORDER WILL OVERTAKE
ONCE YOU CROSS THAT BORDER YOU'RE EITHER UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE BECAUSE HYPERSPACE IS DAMAGED OR YOU'RE UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE BECAUSE YOU'RE *DEAD*
THAT BORDER IS A LOT *LIKE* DEATH, IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT
THE ONLY WAY TO FIND OUT WHAT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE IS TO CROSS OVER AND FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF
Careful, sir. You're starting to sound as if you've contracted a bad case of religion.


AND NOW KEVYN PUTS HIS WICKED PLAN IN MOTION.
LET'S ASSUME THAT BORDER IS DESTRUCTIVE, AND THAT THE GALACTIC CORE AND THE GRAVITIC FABRIC UNDERPINNING OUR HOME HAS BEEN DAMAGED
THE "ACCIDENT OR MALICE" QUESTION BECOMES A VERY IMPORTANT ONE
YES, BUT IT'S NOT RELEVANT TO US, SINCE WE DON'T HAVE SUFFICIENT DATA YET TO DETERMINE HOW SUCH A THING COULD BE DONE
WELL, SUPPOSE FOR JUST A MOMENT THAT THIS IS A MALICIOUS ACT IN A WORST-CASE SCENARIO. SOMEONE IS TRYING TO DESTROY THE GALAXY
LUDICROUS WHO'D WANT TO DO THAT?
Schlock Mercenary

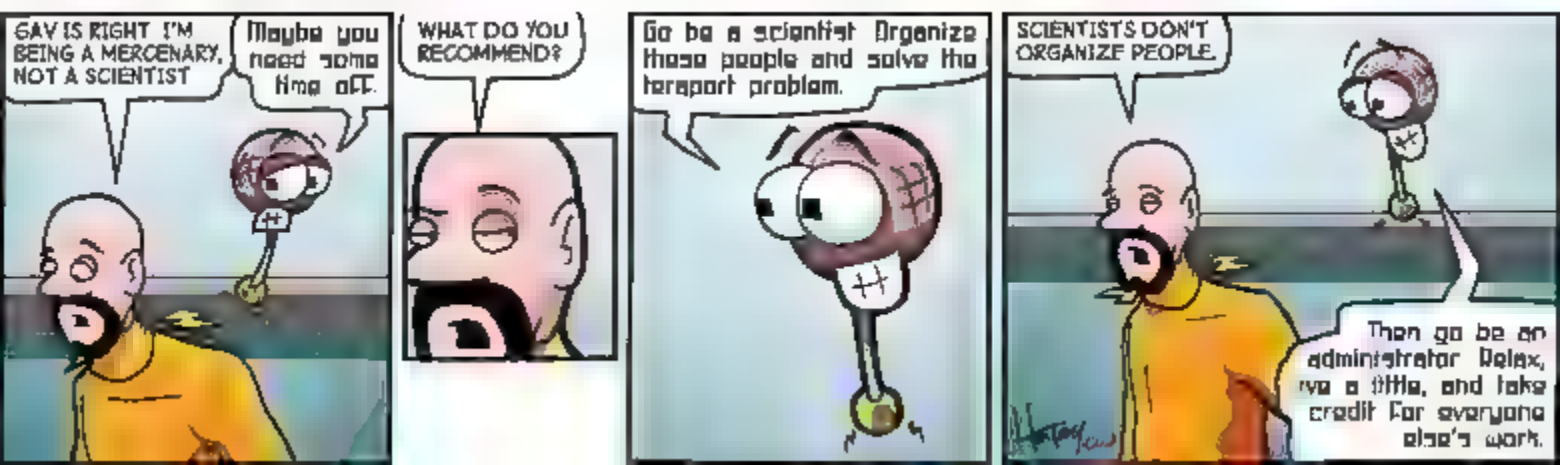
BEAR WITH ME NOW LET'S SUPPOSE THAT THERE IS A METHOD TO REVERSE THE DESTRUCTIVE PROCESS. WHO BETTER THAN THIS GROUP TO DISCOVER IT?
WELL NOBODY PROBABLY
IN WHICH CASE, THE RESPONSIBLE PARTIES, WHO HAVE INVESTED ENORMOUSLY IN THEIR PROJECT TO DESTROY OUR GALAXY WOULD THINK NOTHING OF SPENDING A LITTLE EXTRA TO PUT A STOP TO THIS CONFERENCE AND TO HUNT DOWN EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US
YOU'RE A REAL RAY OF SUNSHINE, YOU KNOW THAT?
I'M PAID TO BE PARANOID THESE DAYS

OH, WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT OF GETTING PAID TO BE PARANOID THERE ARE TWO SQUADS OF TRAINED SOLDIERS, MERCENARIES, AND SECURITY EXPERTS AT THE BACK OF THIS ROOM. THEY'RE ALL AVAILABLE FOR HIRE.
NO PERSONAL CHEQUES

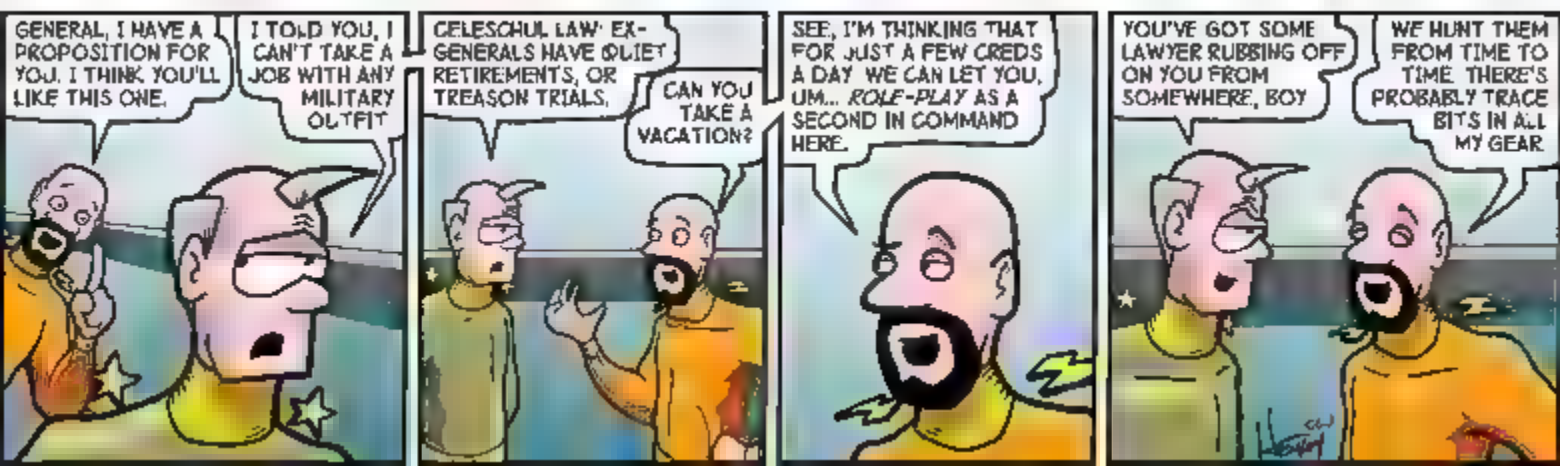

HA HA HA! THAT WAS FUN!
A FEW MINUTES OF ACTING, A LITTLE "FUD" AND NOW WE'VE GOT A DOZEN CUSHY SECURITY CONTRACTS.
I THINK THE HARDEST PART WAS KEEPING A STRAIGHT FACE WHILE CONVINCING THEM THAT THEY WERE KEY FIGURES IN AN INTERGALACTIC WAR.
That play to their egos was masterful, sir
Thurl would argue that it wasn't the hardest part of the operation, though.
HEY, ALL HE HAD TO DO WAS COLLECT THE MONEY
And got proper ID from the Gavs.


KEVYN, ISN'T IT MORE LIKELY FOR AN ATTACKER TO JUST SMASH THE WHOLE HABITAT? I'M NOT SURE INDIVIDUAL BODYGUARDS ARE ENOUGH.
THAT'S WHY OUR A.I. HAS AN ARRAY OF ARMED SENSORS MAINTAINING A SIX-LIGHT MINUTE PERIMETER
UH HUH, YEAH. I WAS THERE WHEN YOU TOLD HIM TO SET IT UP. THAT MEANS I'M PAYING YOU TO DO SOMETHING THAT YOU WERE GOING TO DO *ANYWAY*
YOU'RE NOT PAYING ME FOR SETTING UP THE SENSOR ARRAY. YOU'RE PAYING ME TO WARN YOU IF ANYTHING SHOWS UP.
YOU MEAN YOU WOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT ANYWAY?
OUR FRIENDSHIP WILL PROBABLY LAST LONGER IF I DON'T TRY TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION.

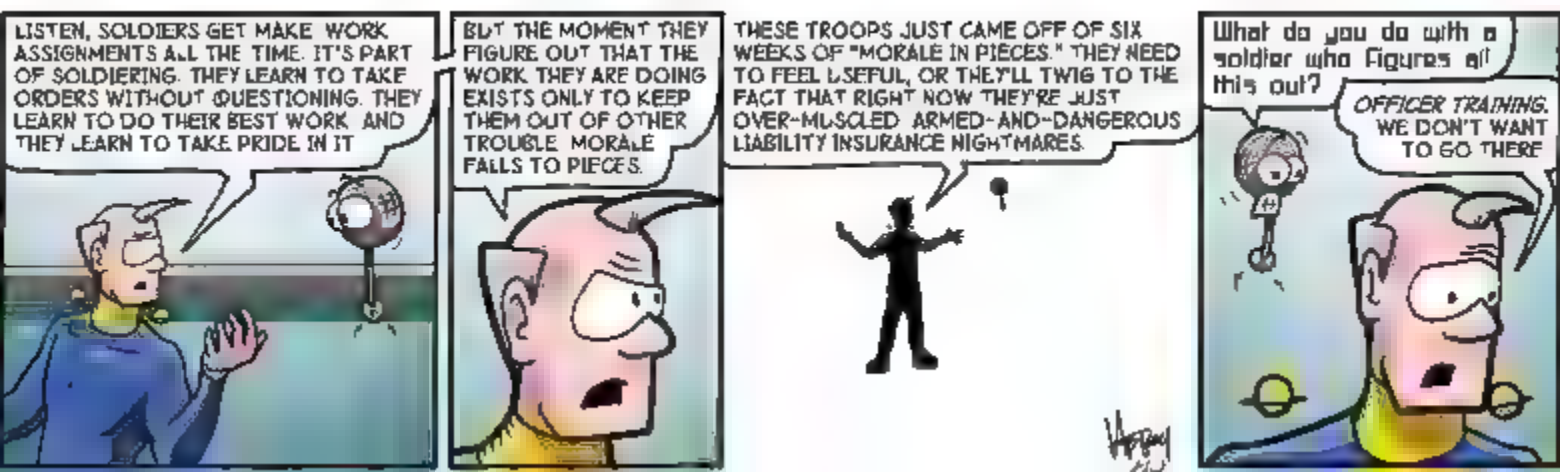
KEVYN, WE INVITED YOU HERE TO *HELP* WE DIDN'T ASK YOU TO SELL US SECURITY SERVICES.
I'M SORRY TO LET YOU DOWN I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO PLAY SCIENTIST ANYMORE.
PLAY? IS *THAT* WHAT YOU THINK WE'RE DOING HERE? *PLAYING?!*
THAT DRUNKEN ELF HAPPENS TO BE A VERY RESPECTED PHYSICIST
THE PROSECUTION IS GOING TO GO TAKE A NAP IN THE CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS NOW

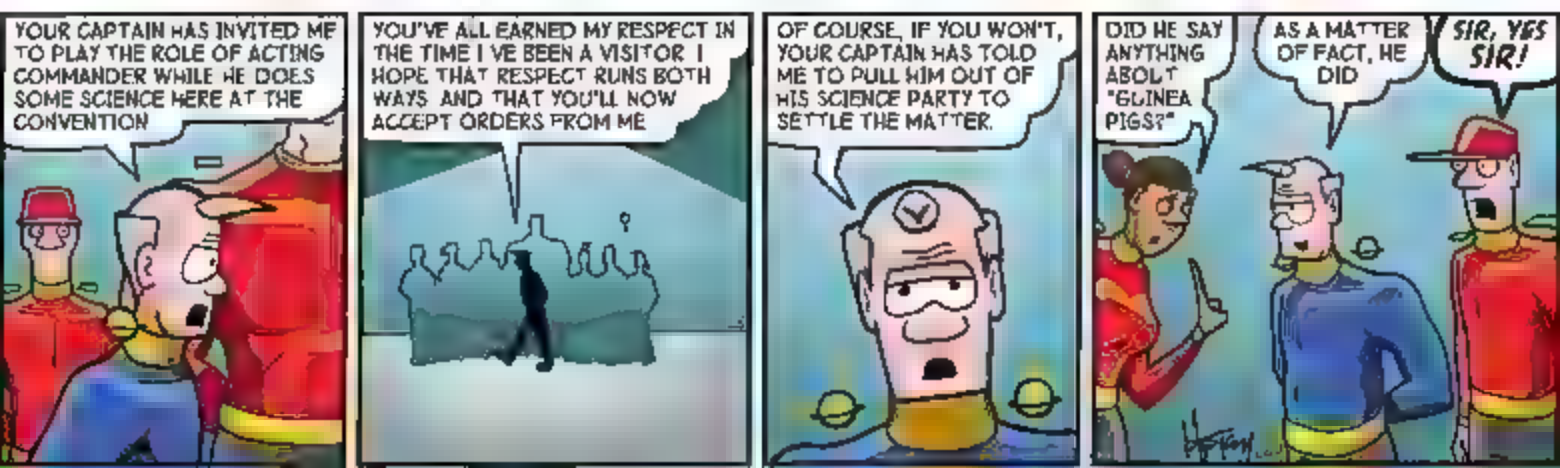

GAV IS RIGHT. I'M BEING A MERCENARY, NOT A SCIENTIST
Maybe you need some time off.
WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND?
Go be a scientist. Organize these people and solve the teleport problem.
SCIENTISTS DON'T ORGANIZE PEOPLE.
Then go be an administrator. Relax, live a little, and take credit for everyone else's work.

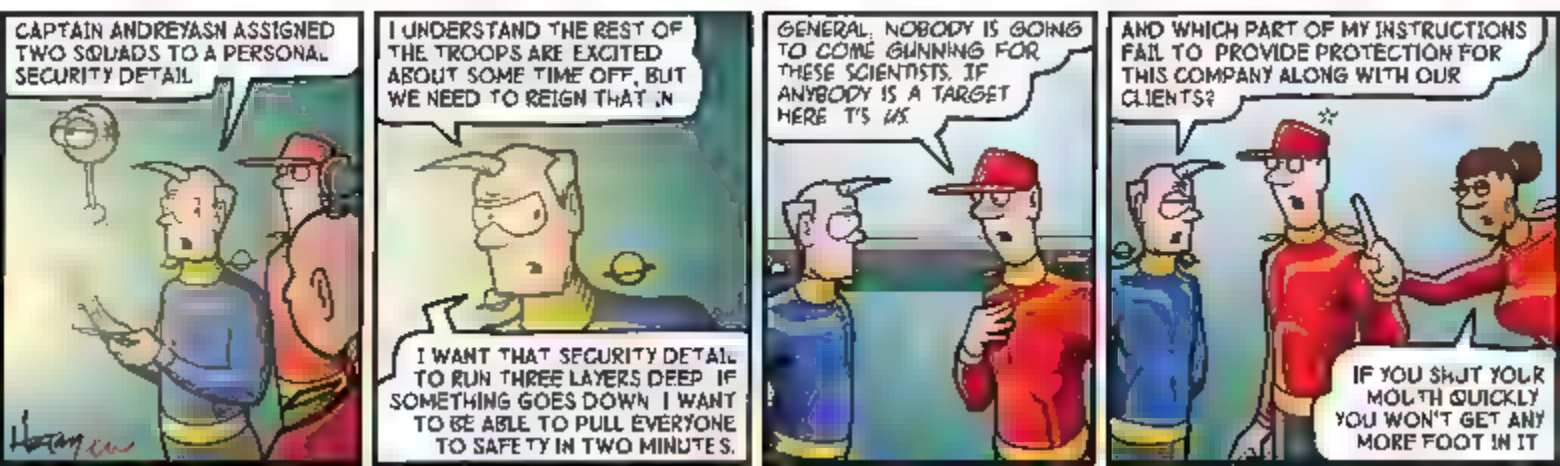
AND WHO'S GOING TO RUN THINGS WHILE I'M AWAY PLAYING SCIENTIST?
Me, of course.
But you can let General Tagon march all the troops around. They'll love that
YOU KNOW, I THINK THEY WILL.

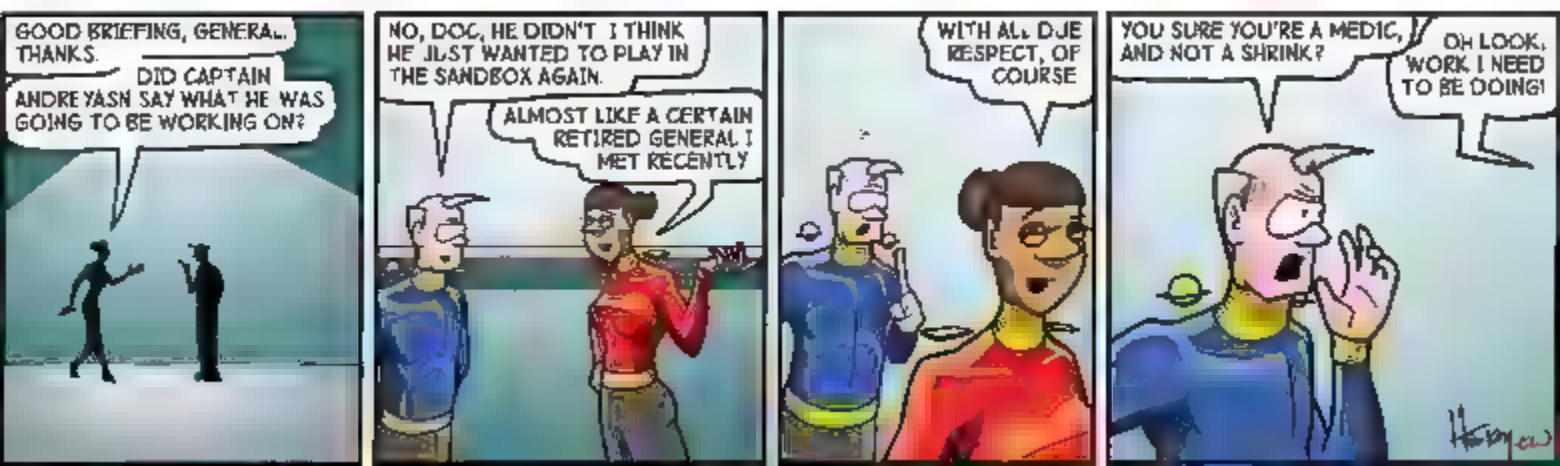

GENERAL, I HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU. I THINK YOU'LL LIKE THIS ONE.
I TOLD YOU, I CAN'T TAKE A JOB WITH ANY MILITARY OUTFIT
CELESCHUL LAW: EX-GENERALS HAVE QUIET RETIREMENTS, OR TREASON TRIALS.
CAN YOU TAKE A VACATION?
SEE, I'M THINKING THAT FOR JUST A FEW CREDS A DAY WE CAN LET YOU, UM... ROLE-PLAY AS A SECOND IN COMMAND HERE.
YOU'VE GOT SOME LAWYER RUBBING OFF ON YOU FROM SOMEWHERE, BOY
WE HUNT THEM FROM TIME TO TIME. THERE'S PROBABLY TRACE BITS IN ALL MY GEAR.

ABOARD THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER GENERAL TAGON REACQUAINTS HIMSELF WITH COMMAND.
WHAT IRONS DO WE HAVE IN THE FIRE, ENNESBY? I HEARD SOMETHING ABOUT ASSIGNMENTS FOR A COUPLE OF SQUADS
The captain scared up a dozen personal security contracts here at the convention
And I do mean "scared up." He spooked twelve scientists, including three of the Gavs, into thinking they needed protection
DO THE TROOPS ON CONTRACT KNOW ABOUT THIS? BECAUSE IF THEY THINK THERE'S NO REAL THREAT, WE'VE GOT A DISASTER ON OUR HANDS.
How so? I don't *think* they were told, but they might figure it out
Schlock Mercenary


LISTEN, SOLDIERS GET MAKE WORK ASSIGNMENTS ALL THE TIME. IT'S PART OF SOLDIERING. THEY LEARN TO TAKE ORDERS WITHOUT QUESTIONING. THEY LEARN TO DO THEIR BEST WORK AND THEY LEARN TO TAKE PRIDE IN IT
BUT THE MOMENT THEY FIGURE OUT THAT THE WORK THEY ARE DOING EXISTS ONLY TO KEEP THEM OUT OF OTHER TROUBLE MORALE FALLS TO PIECES.
THESE TROOPS JUST CAME OFF OF SIX WEEKS OF "MORALE IN PIECES." THEY NEED TO FEEL USEFUL, OR THEY'LL TWIG TO THE FACT THAT RIGHT NOW THEY'RE JUST OVER-MUSCLED ARMED-AND-DANGEROUS LIABILITY INSURANCE NIGHTMARES.
What do you do with a soldier who figures all this out?
OFFICER TRAINING. WE DON'T WANT TO GO THERE

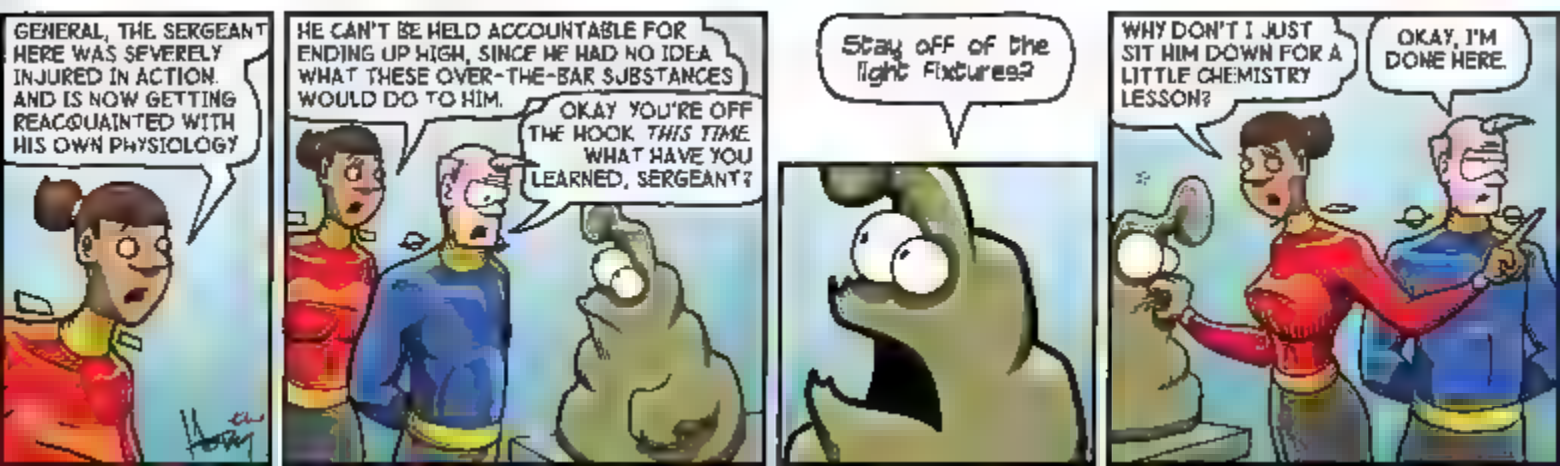

YOUR CAPTAIN HAS INVITED ME TO PLAY THE ROLE OF ACTING COMMANDER WHILE HE DOES SOME SCIENCE HERE AT THE CONVENTION
YOU'VE ALL EARNED MY RESPECT IN THE TIME I VE BEEN A VISITOR I HOPE THAT RESPECT RUNS BOTH WAYS AND THAT YOU'LL NOW ACCEPT ORDERS FROM ME
OF COURSE, IF YOU WON'T, YOUR CAPTAIN HAS TOLD ME TO PULL HIM OUT OF HIS SCIENCE PARTY TO SETTLE THE MATTER.
DID HE SAY ANYTHING ABOUT "GUINEA PIGS?"
AS A MATTER OF FACT, HE DID
SIR, YES SIR!


CAPTAIN ANDREYASN ASSIGNED TWO SQUADS TO A PERSONAL SECURITY DETAIL
I UNDERSTAND THE REST OF THE TROOPS ARE EXCITED ABOUT SOME TIME OFF, BUT WE NEED TO REIGN THAT IN
I WANT THAT SECURITY DETAIL TO RUN THREE LAYERS DEEP IF SOMETHING GOES DOWN I WANT TO BE ABLE TO PULL EVERYONE TO SAFETY IN TWO MINUTES.
GENERAL, NOBODY IS GOING TO COME GUNNING FOR THESE SCIENTISTS. IF ANYBODY IS A TARGET HERE IT'S US.
AND WHICH PART OF MY INSTRUCTIONS FAIL TO PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR THIS COMPANY ALONG WITH OUR CLIENTS?
IF YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH QUICKLY YOU WON'T GET ANY MORE FOOT IN IT

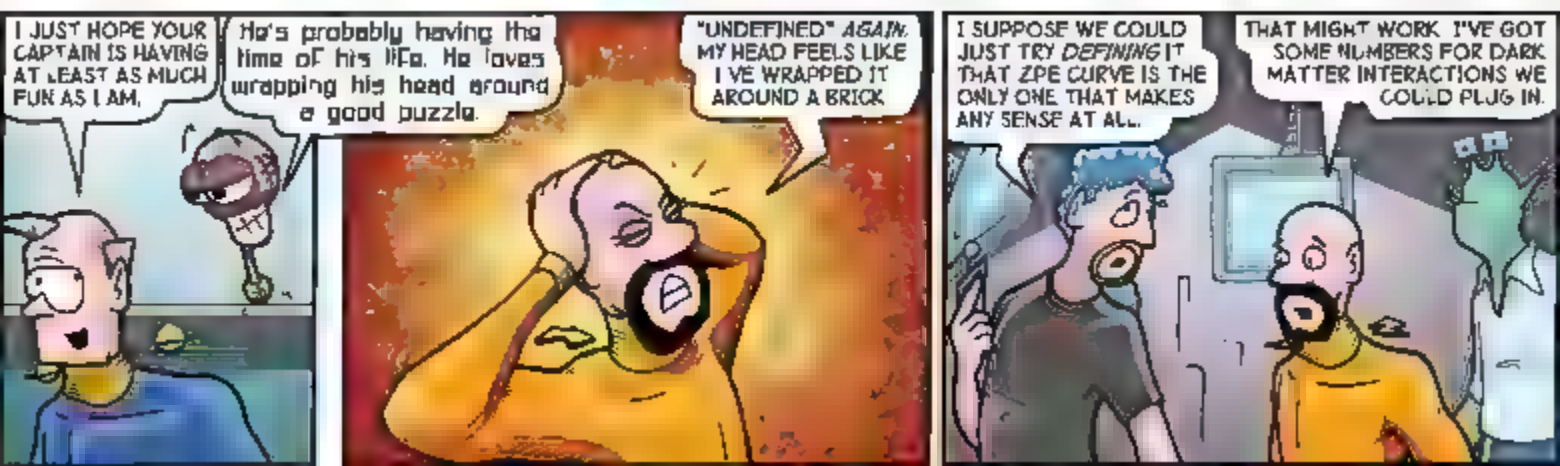

GOOD BRIEFING, GENERAL. THANKS.
DID CAPTAIN ANDREYASN SAY WHAT HE WAS GOING TO BE WORKING ON?
NO, DOC, HE DIDN'T. I THINK HE JUST WANTED TO PLAY IN THE SANDBOX AGAIN.
ALMOST LIKE A CERTAIN RETIRED GENERAL I MET RECENTLY
WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, OF COURSE
YOU SURE YOU'RE A MEDIC, AND NOT A SHRINK?
OH LOOK, WORK I NEED TO BE DOING!

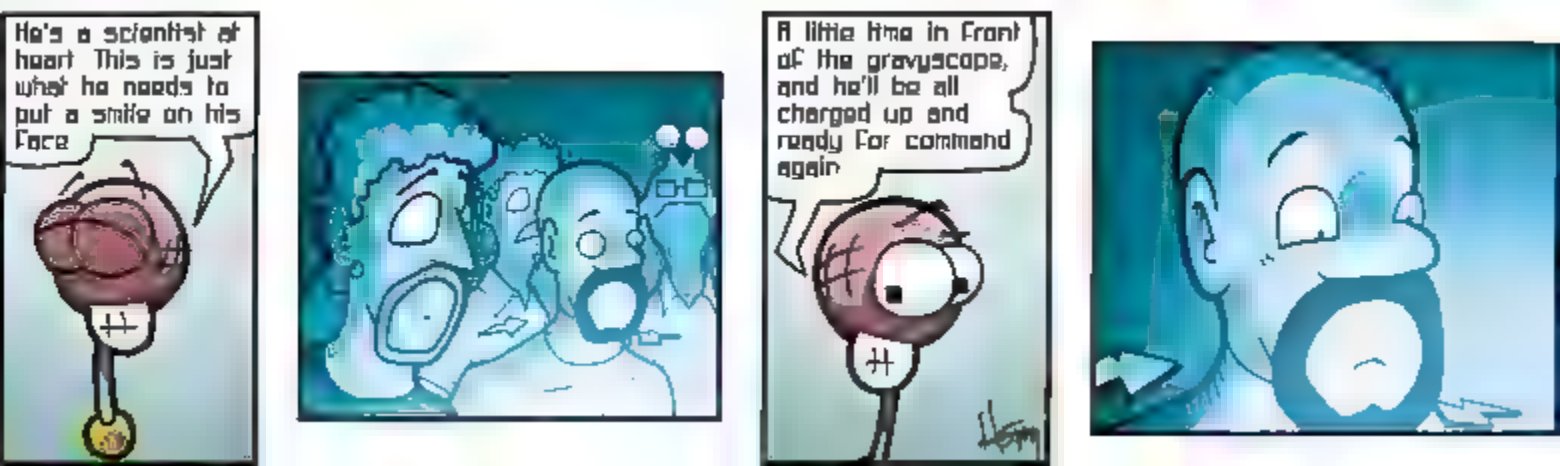
TINKLE TINKLE
TINKLE TINKLE
TINKLE TINKLE
STURDY CHANDELIERS
Yeee-hah!
TINKLE TINKLE
IRRESPONSIBLE BARBOTS. "OVALOWIK WITH A TEQUILA CHASER" INDEED.

SERGEANT I UNDERSTAND YOU WERE HIGH, AND SWINGING FROM THE HOTEL CHANDELIER WHILE SUPPOSEDLY ON DUTY.
I wasn't all that high.
Okay, I was about four meters up, but that's only high for people with bones.
LETS START OVER

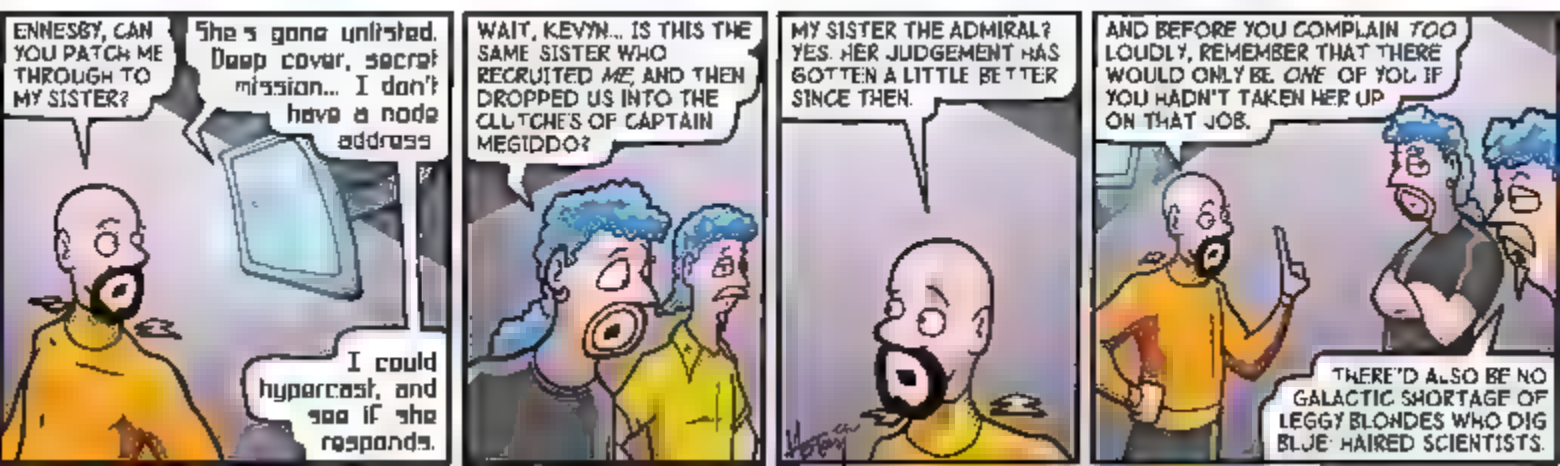

GENERAL, THE SERGEANT HERE WAS SEVERELY INJURED IN ACTION. AND IS NOW GETTING REACQUAINTED WITH HIS OWN PHYSIOLOGY
HE CAN'T BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR ENDING UP HIGH, SINCE HE HAD NO IDEA WHAT THESE OVER-THE-BAR SUBSTANCES WOULD DO TO HIM.
OKAY YOU'RE OFF THE HOOK. *THIS TIME.* WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED, SERGEANT?
Stay off of the light fixtures?
WHY DON'T I JUST SIT HIM DOWN FOR A LITTLE CHEMISTRY LESSON?
OKAY, I'M DONE HERE.

WITH HIS FIRST FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AS ACTING COMMANDER COMPLETE GENERAL (RET.) KARL TAGON PREPARES HIS REPORT
I'm glad you enjoyed yourself
THAT WAS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD IN YEARS.
I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO HIGHLIGHT HERE. PRONTO'S ALMOST BRAWL OVER CARRYING GAV'S LUGGAGE OR NICK'S ACTUAL BRAWL WITH THAT UNIOC DRESSED AS A CYCLOPS?
I heard that the cyclops had to duct tape his jaw back on.
I WISH I COULD HAVE SEEN NICK'S FACE WHEN HE FIRST PUNCHED IT OFF. HE WAS SURE HE'D KILLED THE GUY
Schlock Mercenary

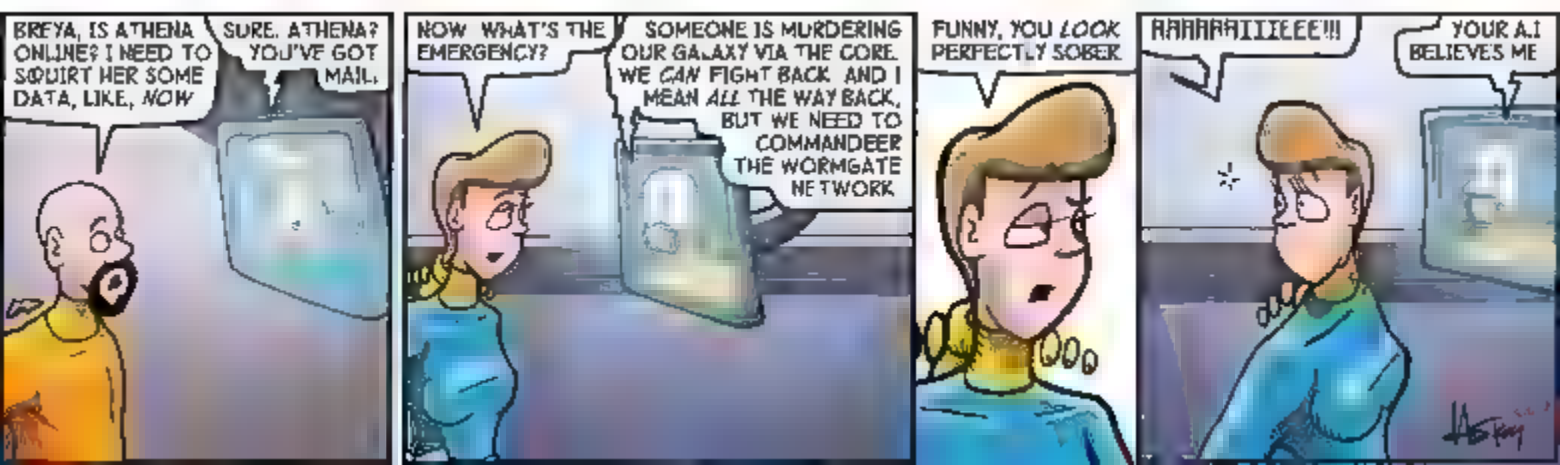

I JUST HOPE YOUR CAPTAIN IS HAVING AT LEAST AS MUCH FUN AS I AM.
He's probably having the time of his life. He loves wrapping his head around a good puzzle.
"UNDEFINED" *AGAIN.* MY HEAD FEELS LIKE I'VE WRAPPED IT AROUND A BRICK.
I SUPPOSE WE COULD JUST TRY *DEFINING* IT. THAT ZPE CURVE IS THE ONLY ONE THAT MAKES ANY SENSE AT ALL.
THAT MIGHT WORK. I'VE GOT SOME NUMBERS FOR DARK MATTER INTERACTIONS WE COULD PLUG IN.

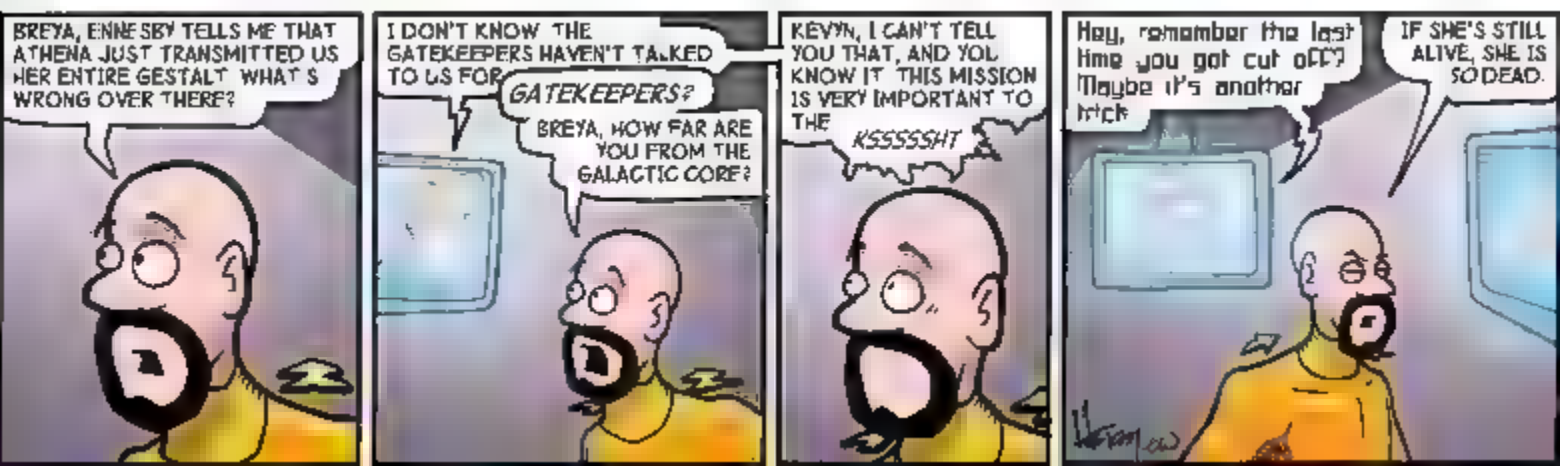

He's a scientist at heart. This is just what he needs to put a smile on his face.
A little time in front of the gravyscope, and he'll be all charged up and ready for command again.

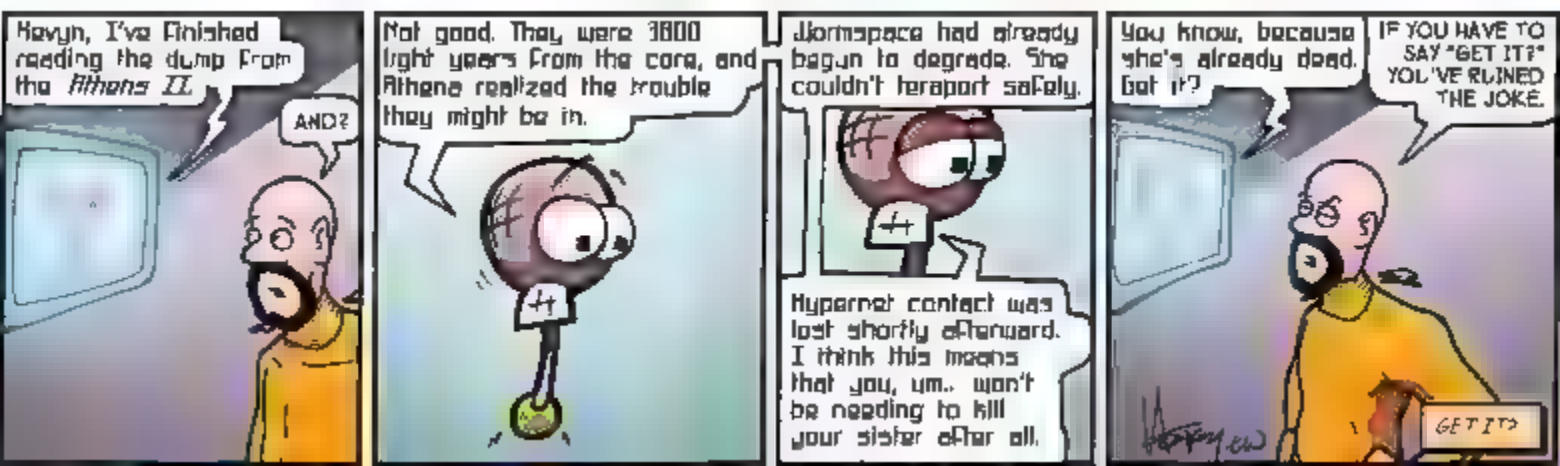
WE WE
WE NEED TO STAY CALM, I THINK THIS CAN BE REVERSED
SURE, IF WE CAN COMMANDEER A FEW THOUSAND WORMGATES
WE WE...
WE'LL NEED A FLEET
WE'LL NEED A *FLEET* OF FLEETS
I KNOW WHERE TO GET SOME.
WE WE
WEE, WEE, WEE, ALL THE WAY HOME! *THIS* LITTLE PIGGY SNAPPED OUT OF IT!


ENNESBY, CAN YOU PATCH ME THROUGH TO MY SISTER?
She's gone unlisted. Deep cover, secret mission... I don't have a node address
I could hypercast, and see if she responds.
WAIT, KEVYN... IS THIS THE SAME SISTER WHO RECRUITED *ME*, AND THEN DROPPED US INTO THE CLUTCHES OF CAPTAIN MEGIDDO?
MY SISTER THE ADMIRAL? YES. HER JUDGEMENT HAS GOTTEN A LITTLE BETTER SINCE THEN.
AND BEFORE YOU COMPLAIN *TOO* LOUDLY, REMEMBER THAT THERE WOULD ONLY BE *ONE* OF YOU IF YOU HADN'T TAKEN HER UP ON THAT JOB.
THERE'D ALSO BE NO GALACTIC SHORTAGE OF LEGGY BLONDES WHO DIG BLUE-HAIRED SCIENTISTS.

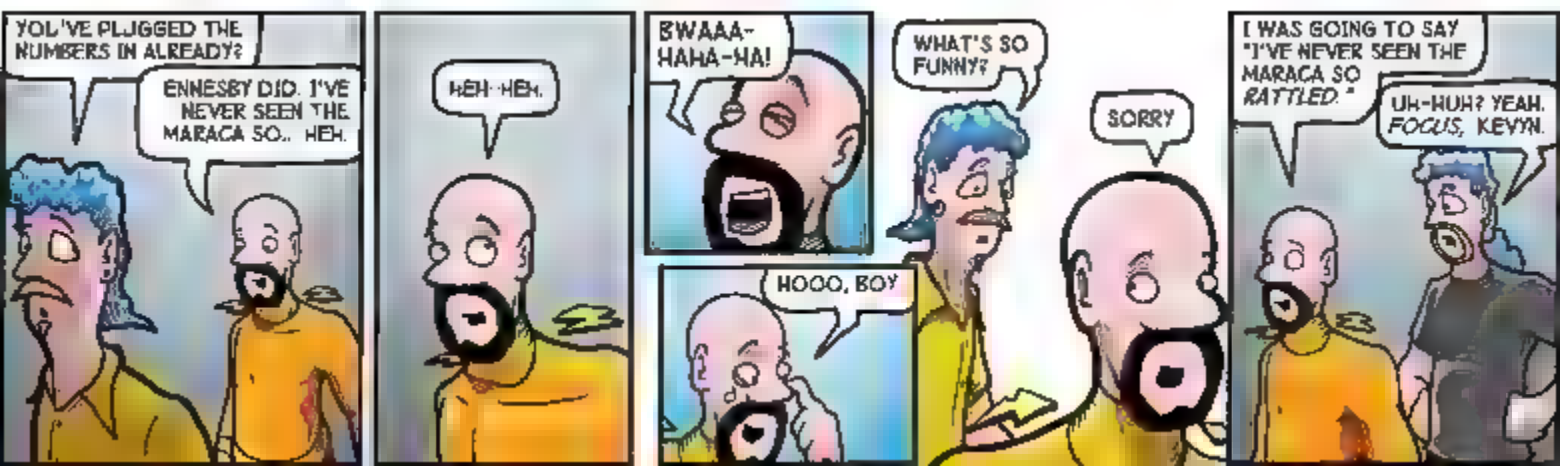
Admiral Andrayash? Your brother is 'casting for you... says it's an emergency.
THANK YOU, ATHENA. PATCH HIM THROUGH.
WE'RE DEEP, ADMIRAL. IT IS A BREACH TO OPEN A LINK
HALF A GALAXY AWAY ABOARD THE JNS DESTROYER ATHENS II
OUR GATEKEEPER CONTACT HASN'T TALKED TO US IN DAYS, CAPTAIN. A BREACH MIGHT GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO TALK TO US ABOUT
BESIDES, I COULD USE SOME INTELLIGENT CONVERSATION.
Even frazzled she can insult both the A.I. and the ape in one go.
EASY, SIS. I HELPED RE-INSTALL YOU, SO I KNOW WHERE YOU KEEP YOUR BRAIN


BREYA, IS ATHENA ONLINE? I NEED TO SQUIRT HER SOME DATA, LIKE, *NOW*
SURE. ATHENA? YOU'VE GOT MAIL.
NOW WHAT'S THE EMERGENCY?
SOMEONE IS MURDERING OUR GALAXY VIA THE CORE. WE *CAN* FIGHT BACK AND I MEAN *ALL* THE WAY BACK, BUT WE NEED TO COMMANDEER THE WORMGATE NETWORK
FUNNY, YOU *LOOK* PERFECTLY SOBER
AAAAAAIIIIEEE!!!
YOUR A.I BELIEVES ME

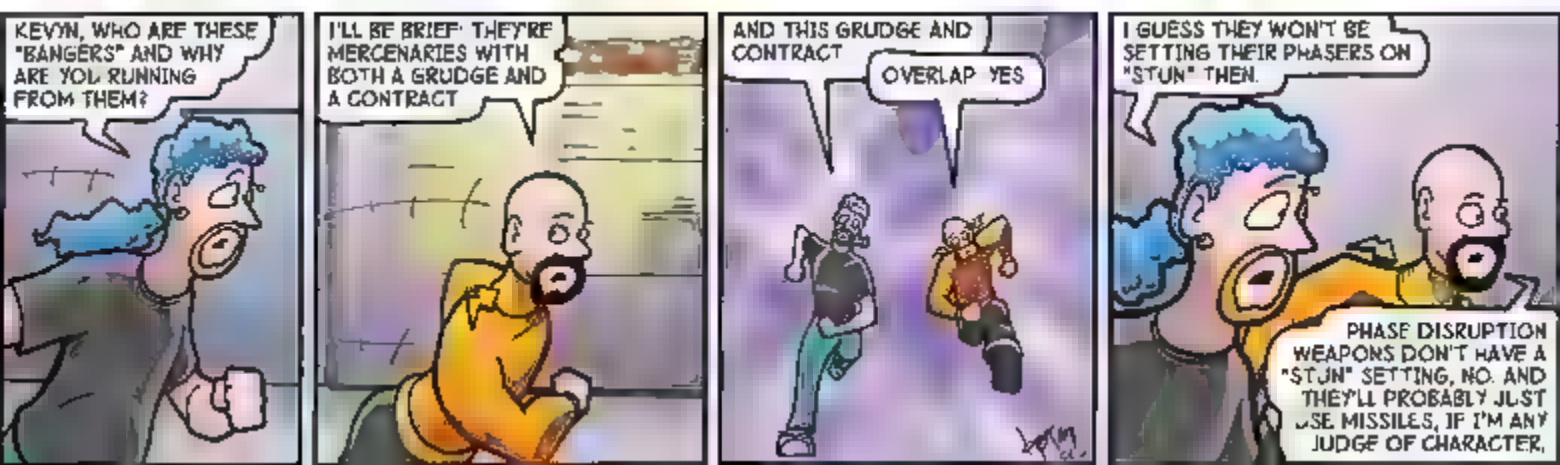

BREYA, ENNESBY TELLS ME THAT ATHENA JUST TRANSMITTED US HER ENTIRE GESTALT WHAT'S WRONG OVER THERE?
I DON'T KNOW THE GATEKEEPERS HAVEN'T TALKED TO US FOR
GATEKEEPERS?
BREYA, HOW FAR ARE YOU FROM THE GALACTIC CORE?
KEVYN, I CAN'T TELL YOU THAT, AND YOU KNOW IT THIS MISSION IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE
KSSSSSHT
Hey, remember the last time you got cut off? Maybe it's another trick
IF SHE'S STILL ALIVE, SHE IS SO DEAD.


Kevyn, I've finished reading the dump from the *Athena II*.
AND?
Not good. They were 3800 light years from the core, and Athena realized the trouble they might be in.
Jumpspace had already begun to degrade. She couldn't teraport safely.
Hypernet contact was lost shortly afterward. I think this means that you, um.. won't be needing to kill your sister after all.
You know, because she's already dead. Get it?
IF YOU HAVE TO SAY "GET IT?" YOU'VE RUINED THE JOKE.
GET IT?

CAPTAIN ANDREYASN RETURNS TO THE CONVENTION WORKSHOP WITH UNFORTUNATE NEWS.
WELL?
MY SISTER IS DEAD
I'M... I'M SORRY TO HEAR THAT
YEAH, WELL..., A LOT MORE PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE BEFORE THIS IS OVER.
THE LAST TRANSMISSION FROM THE ATHENS II CONFIRMS OUR NUMBERS. THE AI HAD MUCH BETTER SENSORS THAN THE PROBES YOU'VE BEEN USING.
Schlock Mercenary

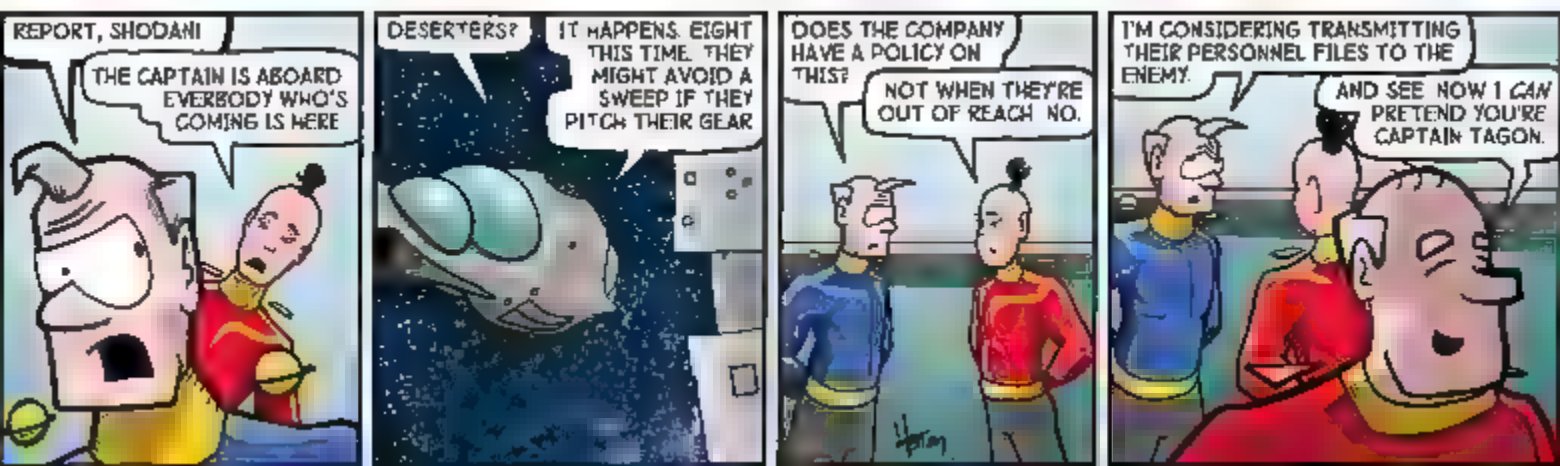

YOU'VE PLUGGED THE NUMBERS IN ALREADY?
ENNESBY DID. I'VE NEVER SEEN THE MARACA SO... HEH.
HEH-HEH.
BWAAA-HAHA-HA!
HOOO, BOY
WHAT'S SO FUNNY?
SORRY
I WAS GOING TO SAY "I'VE NEVER SEEN THE MARACA SO *RATTLED*."
UH-HUH? YEAH. *FOCUS*, KEVYN.

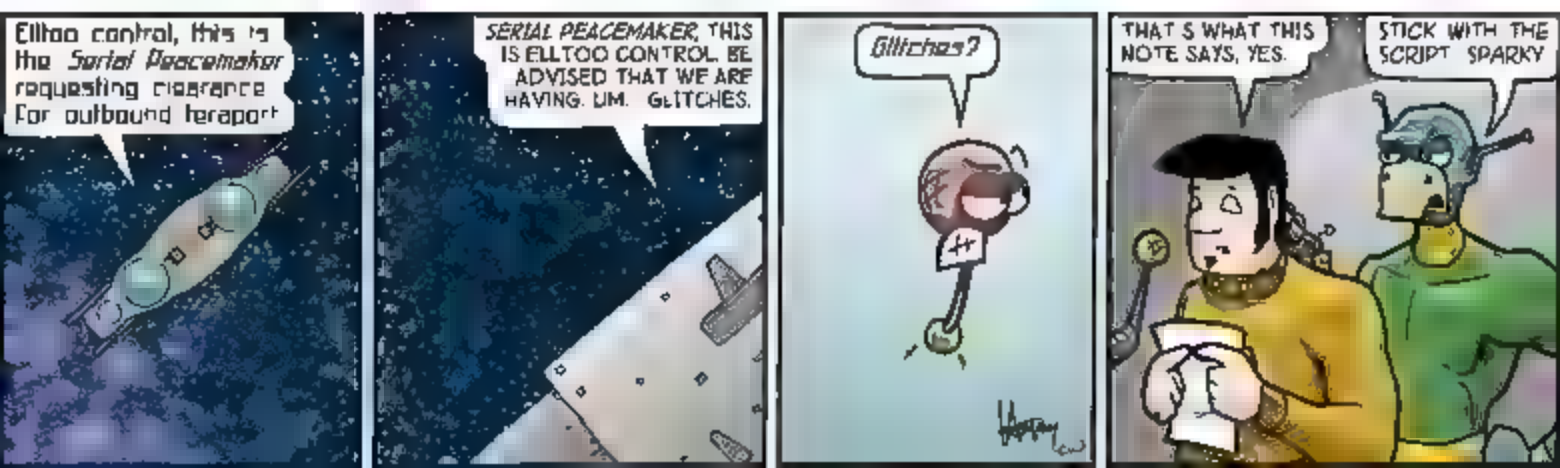
SORRY GAV I JUST NEEDED TO LAUGH
SURE, WE *ALL* NEED TO LAUGH SOMEBODY SPUN OUR GALACTIC CORE UP TO IMPROBABLE SPEEDS, PUSHED IT OFF THE ZERO-POINT-ENERGY CURVE, AND BIRTHED AN EXPANDING UNIVERSE OF DEATH.
TIME RUNS HUNDREDS OF TIMES FASTER THERE, THOUGH, SO WE'D BETTER HURRY UP AND BE DONE LAUGHING. THE CLOCK IS TICKING!
ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, WE CAN BE PRETTY SURE THAT NOBODY IS GOING TO TRY TO PERSONALLY ASSASSINATE US.
Captain, the Bangers are inbound. We have eight minutes to get clear
WELL, NOBODY'S TRYING TO PERSONALLY ASSASSINATE *YOU*, IT'S TIME FOR *ME* TO RUN AWAY NOW

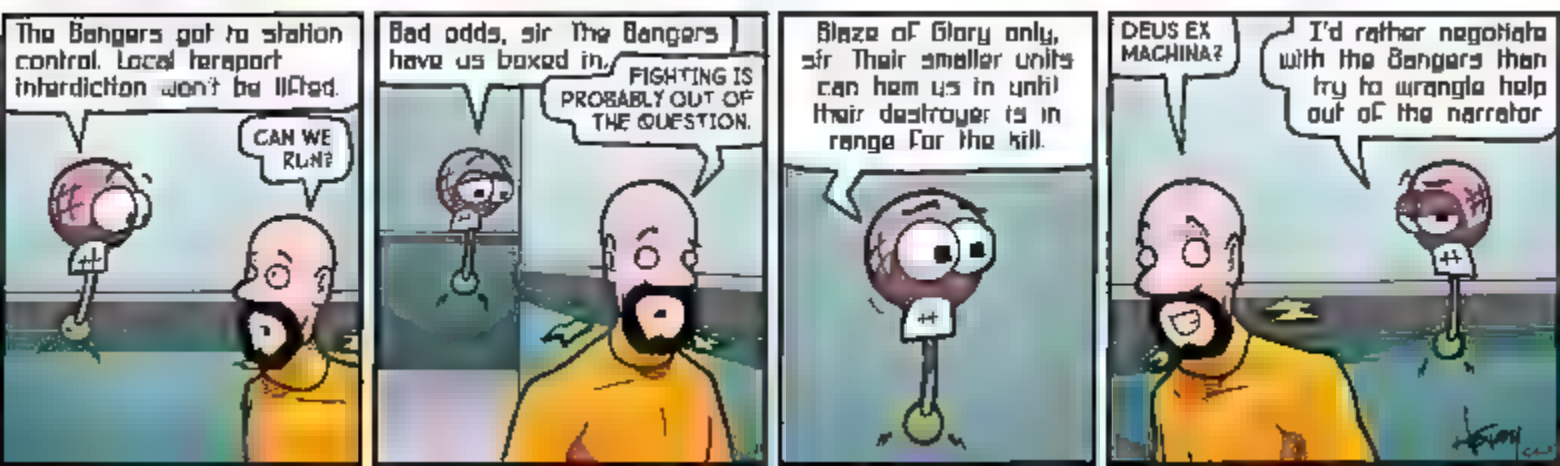

KEVYN, WHO ARE THESE "BANGERS" AND WHY ARE YOU RUNNING FROM THEM?
I'LL BE BRIEF: THEY'RE MERCENARIES WITH BOTH A GRUDGE AND A CONTRACT
AND THIS GRUDGE AND CONTRACT
OVERLAP. YES
I GUESS THEY WON'T BE SETTING THEIR PHASERS ON "STUN" THEN.
PHASE DISRUPTION WEAPONS DON'T HAVE A "STUN" SETTING, NO. AND THEY'LL PROBABLY JUST USE MISSILES, IF I'M ANY JUDGE OF CHARACTER.

DUSTOFF BY THE NUMBERS, SHODAN. I WANT CAPTAIN ANDREYASN BACK ABOARD IN TWO MINUTES
YES SIR. WHAT ABOUT OUR CLIENTS, SIR?
DITCH 'EM. WE'RE DEFAULTING, PER THE FORFEIT CLAUSE IN OUR CONTRACT
THURL, PAY THAT OUT, *NOW*. I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE THE SYSTEM WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S MONEY STILL IN MY POCKET
UP UNTIL YOU SAID THAT, I COULD HAVE PRETENDED YOU WERE CAPTAIN TAGON.
HEY, I REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED THE *LAST* TIME WE LEFT WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S MONEY

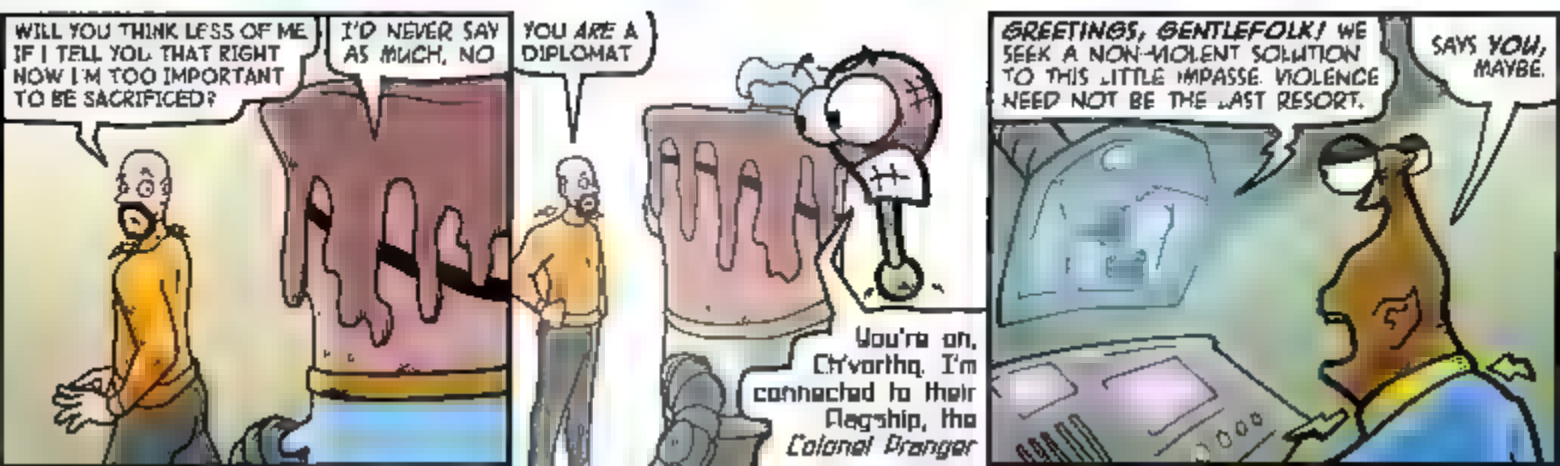
GAV, IF YOU WANT TO COME ALONG, THAT'S FINE YOU'LL BE SAFER HERE THOUGH.
WE'RE GOING TO
HEY!!
YOU RUN TOO SLOW, SIR
WIT' ALL DUE RESPEC', SIR

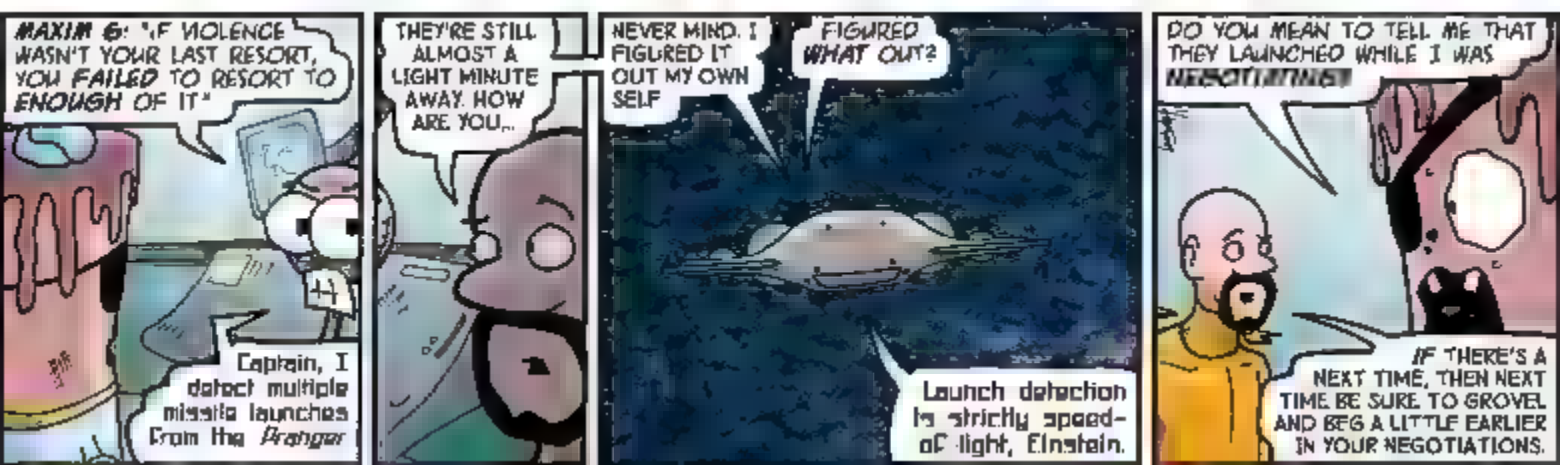

REPORT, SHODANI
THE CAPTAIN IS ABOARD EVERBODY WHO'S COMING IS HERE
DESERTERS?
IT HAPPENS. EIGHT THIS TIME. THEY MIGHT AVOID A SWEEP IF THEY PITCH THEIR GEAR
DOES THE COMPANY HAVE A POLICY ON THIS?
NOT WHEN THEY'RE OUT OF REACH NO.
I'M CONSIDERING TRANSMITTING THEIR PERSONNEL FILES TO THE ENEMY.
AND SEE NOW I CAN PRETEND YOU'RE CAPTAIN TAGON.

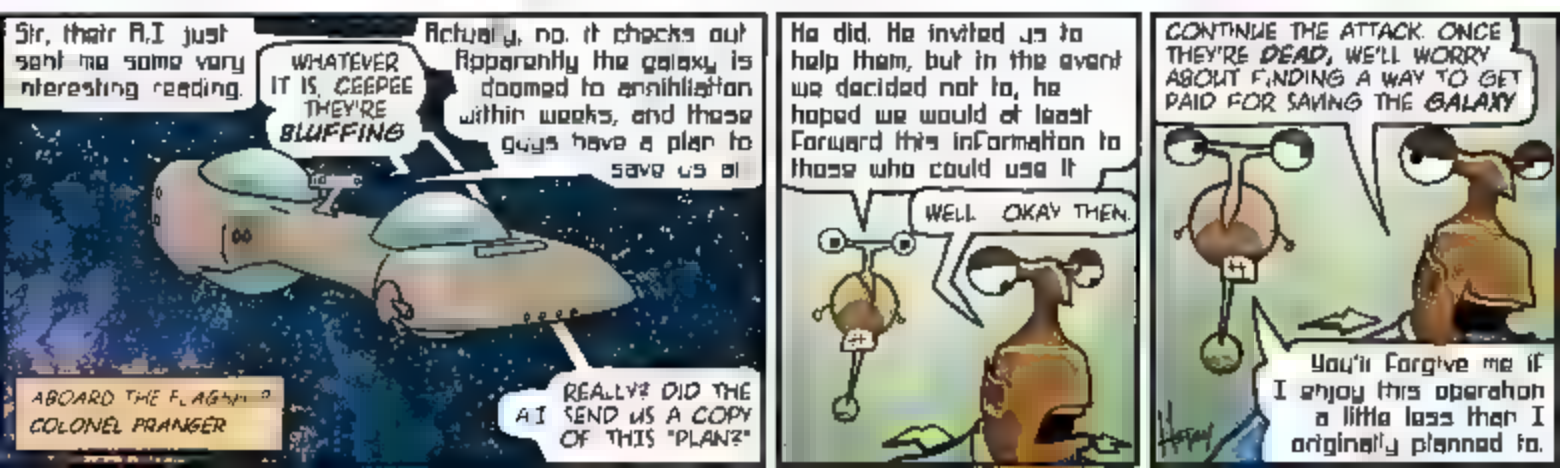

Elltoo control, this is the *Serial Peacemaker* requesting clearance for outbound teraport
SERIAL PEACEMAKER, THIS IS ELLTOO CONTROL. BE ADVISED THAT WE ARE HAVING. UM. GLITCHES.
Glitches?
THAT'S WHAT THIS NOTE SAYS, YES.
STICK WITH THE SCRIPT SPARKY

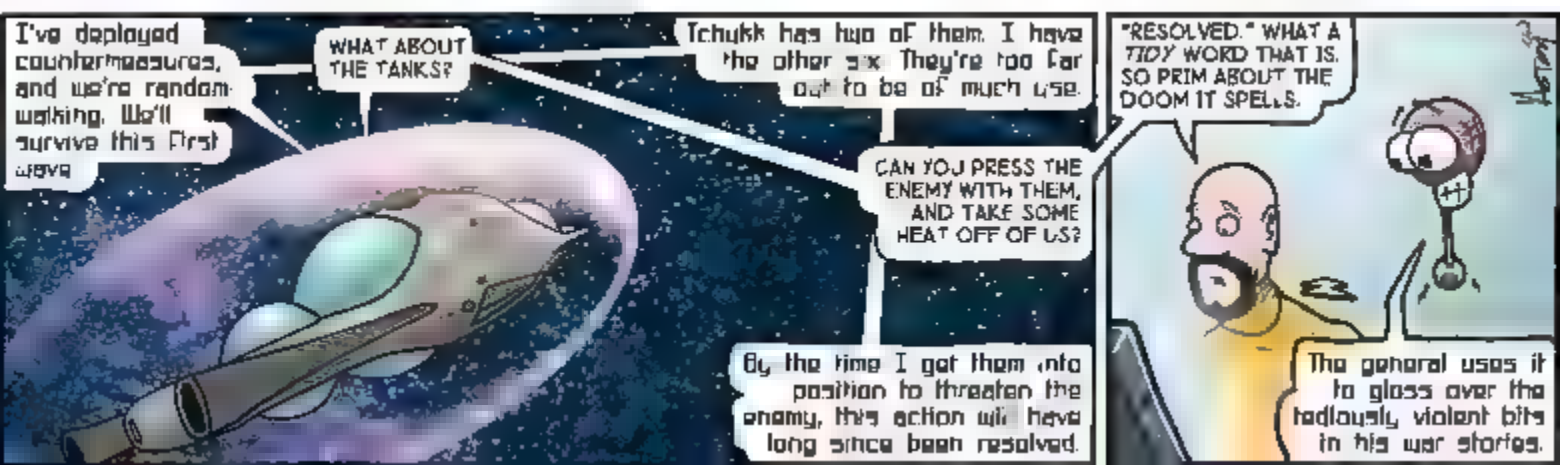

The Bangers got to station control. Local teraport interdiction won't be lifted.
CAN WE RUN?
Bad odds, sir. The Bangers have us boxed in.
FIGHTING IS PROBABLY OUT OF THE QUESTION.
Blaze of Glory only, sir. Their smaller units can harm us in until their destroyer is in range for the kill.
DEUS EX MACHINA?
I'd rather negotiate with the Bangers than try to wrangle help out of the narrator

OUR HEROES ARE IN TROUBLE. THEY CAN'T RUN. THEY'RE OUTGUNNED. AND THE ENEMY HAS MURDER ON HIS MIND.
CH'VORTHO! YOU WERE A DIPLOMAT ONCE! GET ON THE HORN!
I NEED BARGAINING CHIPS, CAPTAIN. WHAT CAN I OFFER THEM?
WHATEVER YOU THINK WILL WORK. CH'VORTHO ANYTHING.
OKAY... I COULD START BY OFFERING THEM YOU, IF THEY'LL SPARE THE TROOPS.
Schlock Mercenary

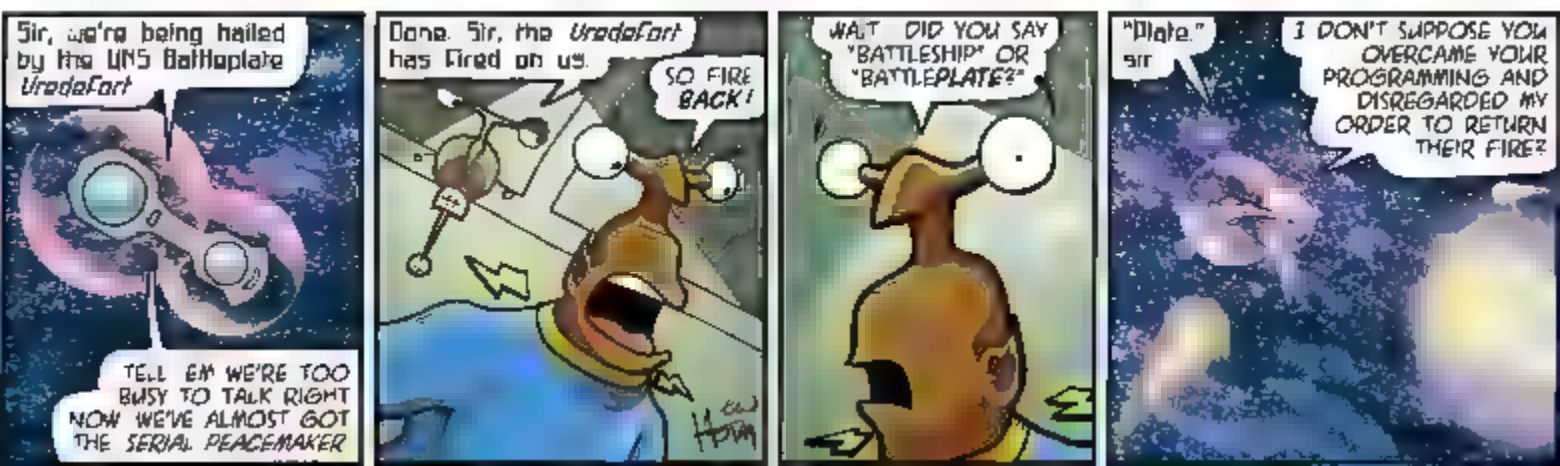

WILL YOU THINK LESS OF ME IF I TELL YOU THAT RIGHT NOW I'M TOO IMPORTANT TO BE SACRIFICED?
I'D NEVER SAY AS MUCH, NO
YOU ARE A DIPLOMAT
You're on, Ch'vorthq. I'm connected to their flagship, the Colonel Pranger
GREETINGS, GENTLEFOLK! WE SEEK A NON-VIOLENT SOLUTION TO THIS LITTLE IMPASSE. VIOLENCE NEED NOT BE THE LAST RESORT.
SAYS YOU, MAYBE.


MAXIM 6: "IF VIOLENCE WASN'T YOUR LAST RESORT, YOU FAILED TO RESORT TO ENOUGH OF IT"
Captain, I detect multiple missile launches from the Avenger
THEY'RE STILL ALMOST A LIGHT MINUTE AWAY. HOW ARE YOU...
NEVER MIND. I FIGURED IT OUT MY OWN SELF
FIGURED WHAT OUT?
Launch detection is strictly speed-of-light, Einstein.
DO YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT THEY LAUNCHED WHILE I WAS NEGOTIATING?
IF THERE'S A NEXT TIME, THEN NEXT TIME BE SURE TO GROVEL AND BEG A LITTLE EARLIER IN YOUR NEGOTIATIONS.

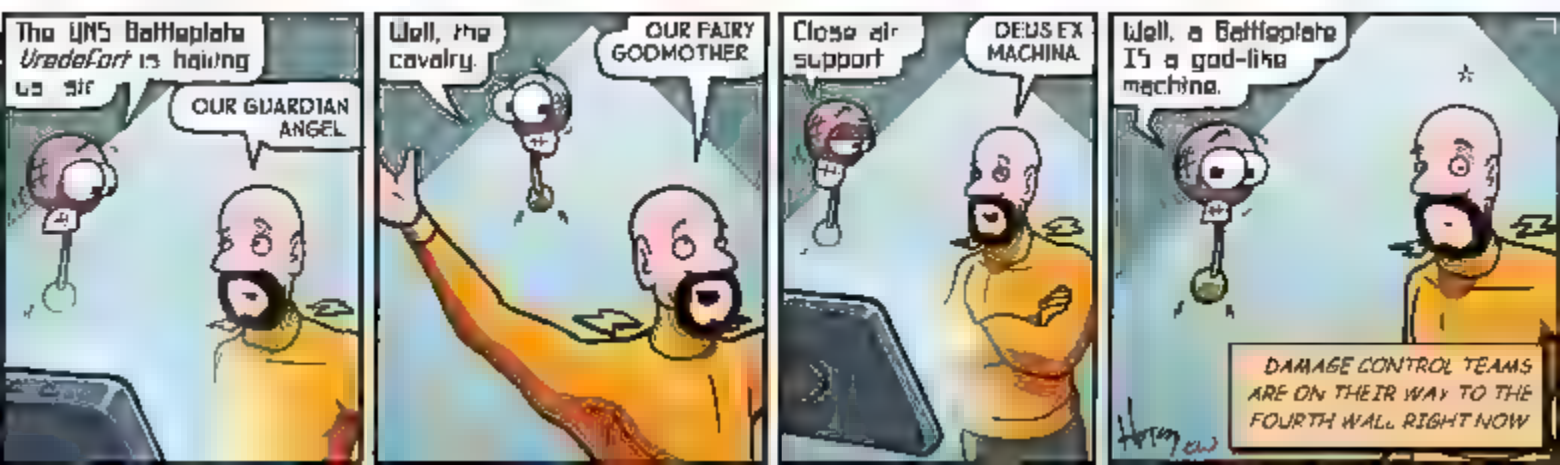

Sir, their A.I. just sent me some very interesting reading.
WHATEVER IT IS, CEEPEE THEY'RE BLUFFING
Actually, no. It checks out. Apparently the galaxy is doomed to annihilation within weeks, and these guys have a plan to save us all.
ABOARD THE FLAGSHIP
COLONEL PRANGER
REALLY? DID THE A.I. SEND US A COPY OF THIS "PLAN?"
He did. He invited us to help them, but in the event we decided not to, he hoped we would at least forward this information to those who could use it.
WELL. OKAY THEN.
CONTINUE THE ATTACK. ONCE THEY'RE DEAD, WE'LL WORRY ABOUT FINDING A WAY TO GET PAID FOR SAVING THE GALAXY.
You'll forgive me if I enjoy this operation a little less than I originally planned to.

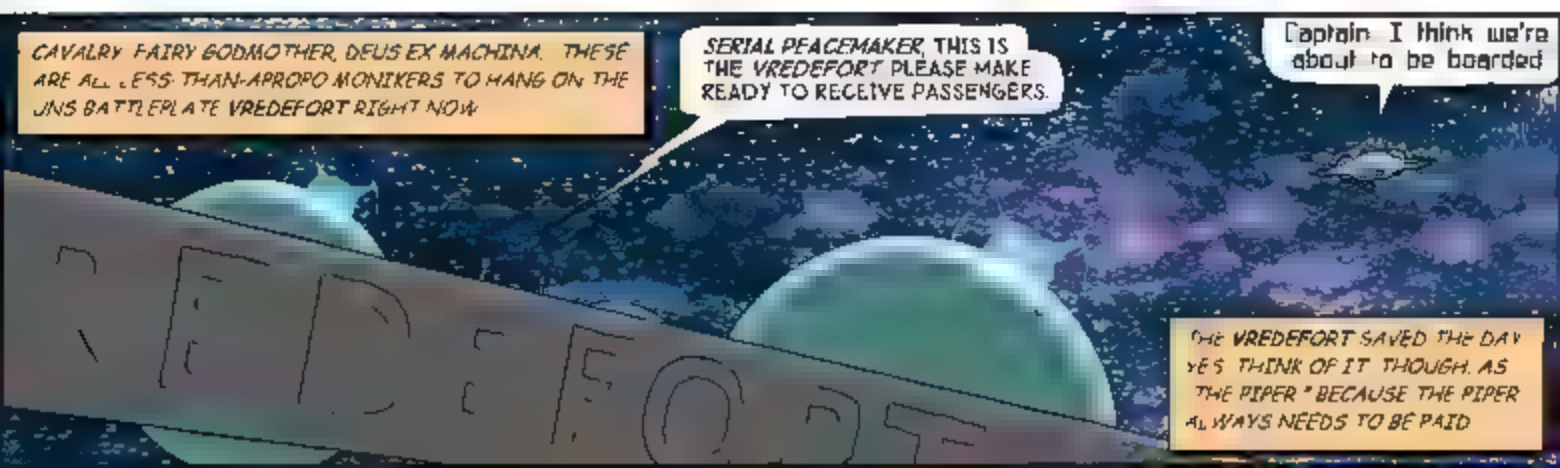

I've deployed countermeasures, and we're random walking. We'll survive this first wave.
WHAT ABOUT THE TANKS?
Tchukk has two of them. I have the other six. They're too far out to be of much use.
CAN YOU PRESS THE ENEMY WITH THEM, AND TAKE SOME HEAT OFF OF US?
By the time I get them into position to threaten the enemy, this action will have long since been resolved.
"RESOLVED." WHAT A *TIDY* WORD THAT IS. SO PRIM ABOUT THE DOOM IT SPELLS.
The general uses it to gloss over the tediously violent bits in his war stories.

BATTLEFIELDS IN SPACE ARE CURIOUSLY CROWDED PLACES FOR AS EMPTY AS THEY LOOK
MISSILES ANTI-MISSILE MISSILES ANTI ANTI MISSILE MISSILES. ANTI ANTI-ANTI MISSILE MISSILES.
COUNTER-MEASURES. COUNTER-COUNTER-MEASURES MUNITIONS SUB MUNITIONS SUB SUB MUNITIONS
FOR EVERY WEAPON DEPLOYED THERE IS AN ESCALATING HIERARCHY OF RESPONSES AND THE NET RESULT IS THAT AN ENTIRE VOLUME OF SPACE BECOMES UNSAFE REGARDLESS OF WHOSE SIDE YOU'RE ON
IT'S LIKE THAT THOUSAND-YEAR OLD LEGEND ABOUT THE RETURN OF THE CAT IN THE HAT
SPEAKING OF WHICH THE U.N.S BATTLEPLATE THAT JUST ARRIVED ON THE SCENE COULD PLAY "LITTLE CAT Z"

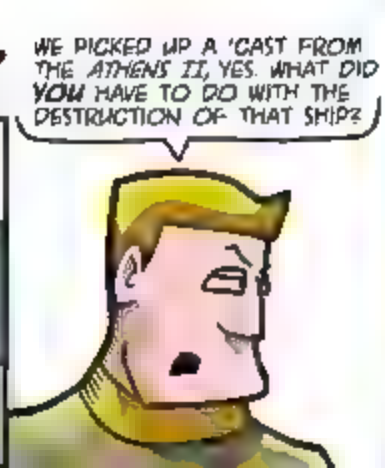

Sir, we're being hailed by the UNS Battleplate *Uradefort*
TELL EM WE'RE TOO BUSY TO TALK RIGHT NOW WE'VE ALMOST GOT THE *SERIAL PEACEMAKER*
Done. Sir, the *Uradefort* has fired on us.
SO FIRE BACK!
WAIT DID YOU SAY "BATTLESHIP" OR "BATTLE*PLATE*?"
"Plate." sir
I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU OVERCAME YOUR PROGRAMMING AND DISREGARDED MY ORDER TO RETURN THEIR FIRE?

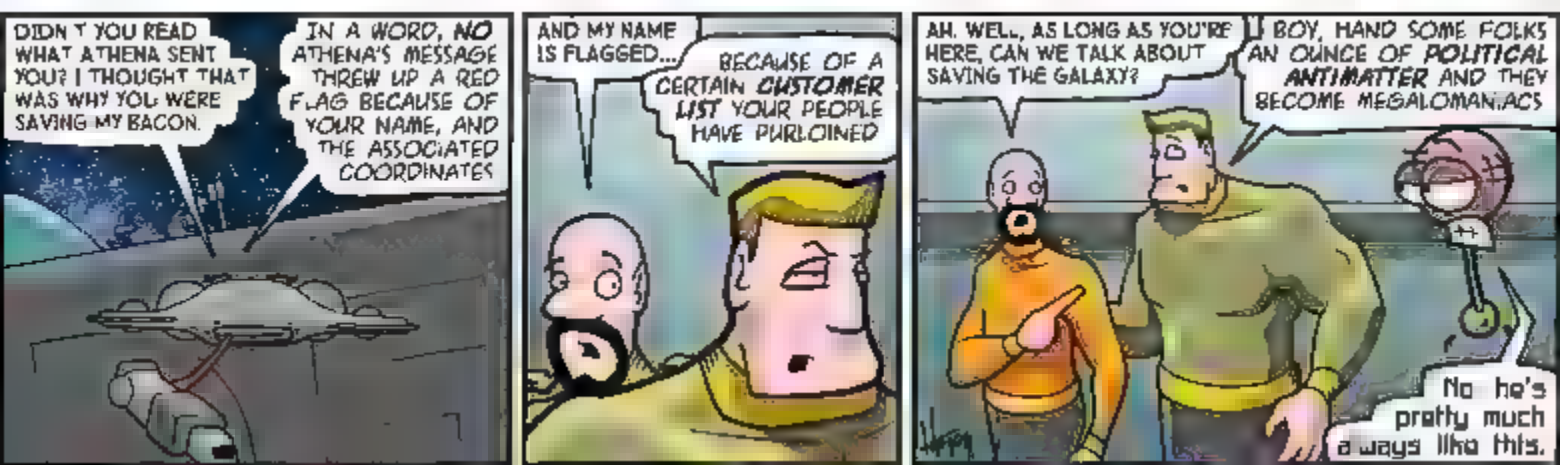
Sir I think our hypernet jammer may be working
THIRD SALVO LOST TACTICAL COORDINATION! I CAN SEE IT FROM HERE
HURRAY FOR EQUIPMENT LIVING UP TO ITS SALES PITCH
Don't cheer yet, sir
UGH. A FOURTH WAVE, ALREADY?
No, but I doubt our jamming was what scrambled salvo three.
The Colonel Pranger just blew up.
SO IT'S KIND OF A "GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS" THING.

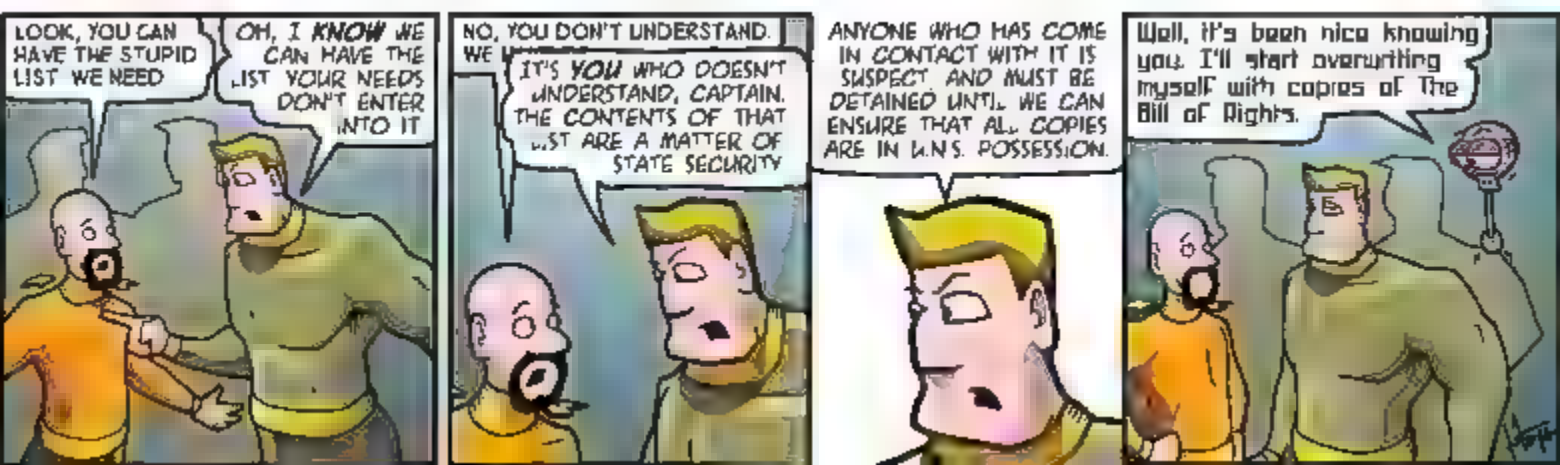

The UNS Battleplate *Vradefort* is holding us air
OUR GUARDIAN ANGEL
Well, the cavalry.
OUR FAIRY GODMOTHER
Close air support
DEUS EX MACHINA
Well, a Battleplate IS a god-like machine.
DAMAGE CONTROL TEAMS ARE ON THEIR WAY TO THE FOURTH WALL RIGHT NOW

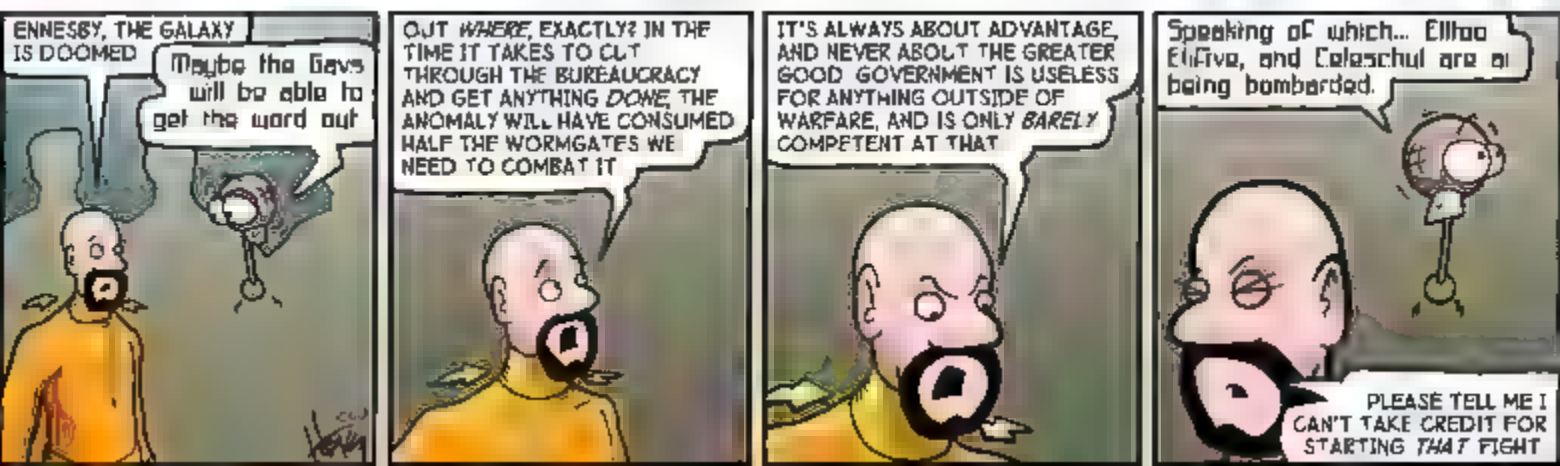

CAVALRY FAIRY GODMOTHER, DEUS EX MACHINA. THESE ARE ALL LESS THAN-APROPO MONIKERS TO HANG ON THE JNS BATTLEPLATE VREDEFORT RIGHT NOW.
SERIAL PEACEMAKER, THIS IS THE VREDEFORT PLEASE MAKE READY TO RECEIVE PASSENGERS.
Captain I think we're about to be boarded
THE VREDEFORT SAVED THE DAY YES THINK OF IT THOUGH, AS THE PIPER * BECAUSE THE PIPER ALWAYS NEEDS TO BE PAID

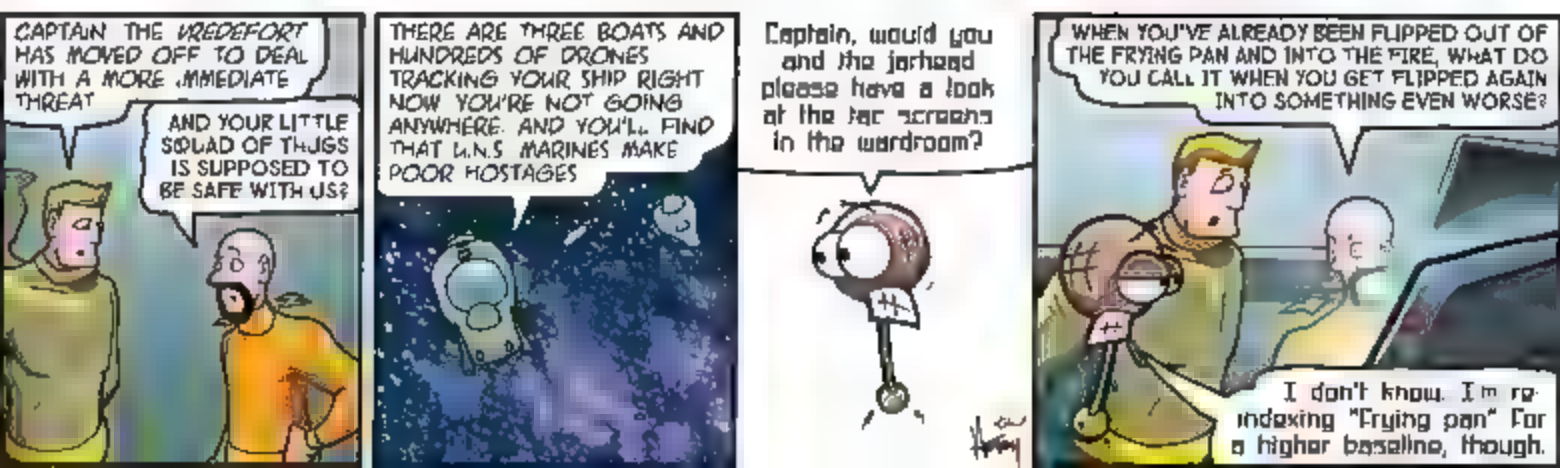
Schlock Mercenary

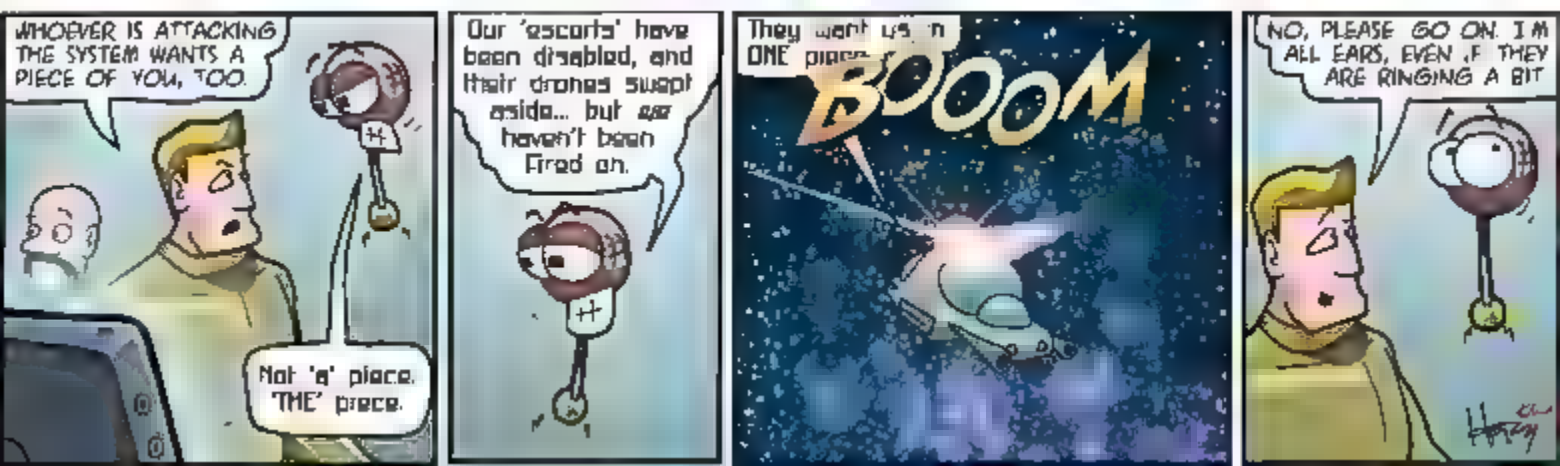



DIDN'T YOU READ WHAT ATHENA SENT YOU? I THOUGHT THAT WAS WHY YOU WERE SAVING MY BACON.
IN A WORD, NO ATHENA'S MESSAGE THREW UP A RED FLAG BECAUSE OF YOUR NAME, AND THE ASSOCIATED COORDINATES
AND MY NAME IS FLAGGED...
BECAUSE OF A CERTAIN CUSTOMER LIST YOUR PEOPLE HAVE PURLOINED
AH. WELL, AS LONG AS YOU'RE HERE, CAN WE TALK ABOUT SAVING THE GALAXY?
BOY, HAND SOME FOLKS AN OUNCE OF POLITICAL ANTIMATTER AND THEY BECOME MEGALOMANIACS
No he's pretty much always like this.

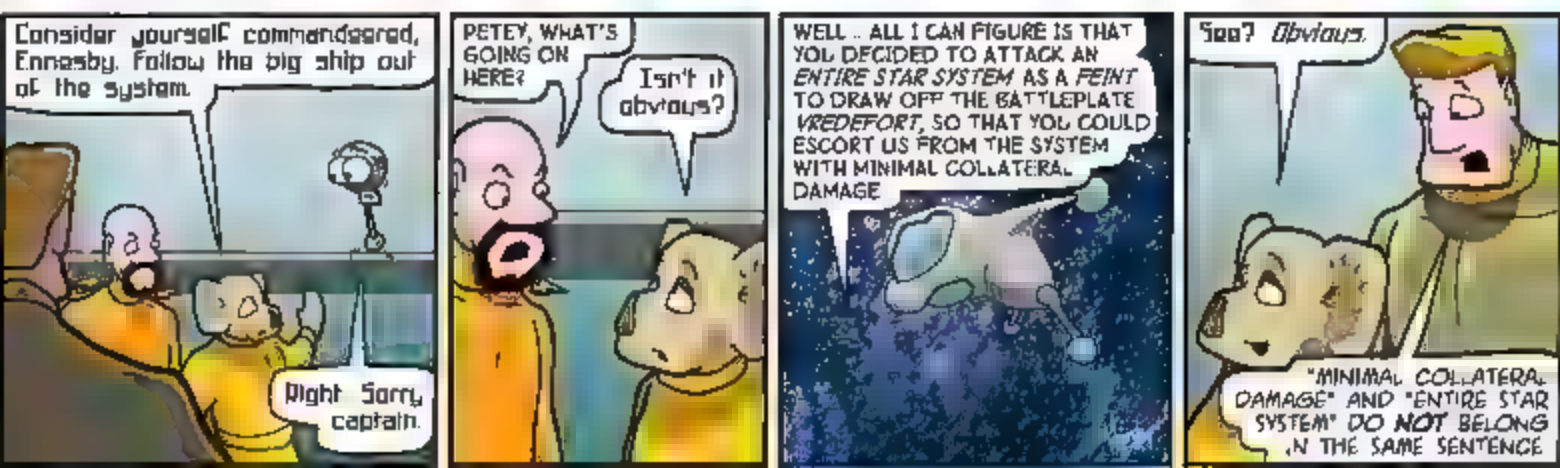

LOOK, YOU CAN HAVE THE STUPID LIST WE NEED
OH, I KNOW WE CAN HAVE THE LIST YOUR NEEDS DON'T ENTER INTO IT
NO, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. WE
IT'S YOU WHO DOESN'T UNDERSTAND, CAPTAIN. THE CONTENTS OF THAT LIST ARE A MATTER OF STATE SECURITY
ANYONE WHO HAS COME IN CONTACT WITH IT IS SUSPECT AND MUST BE DETAINED UNTIL WE CAN ENSURE THAT ALL COPIES ARE IN U.N.S. POSSESSION.
Well, it's been nice knowing you. I'll start overwriting myself with copies of The Bill of Rights.

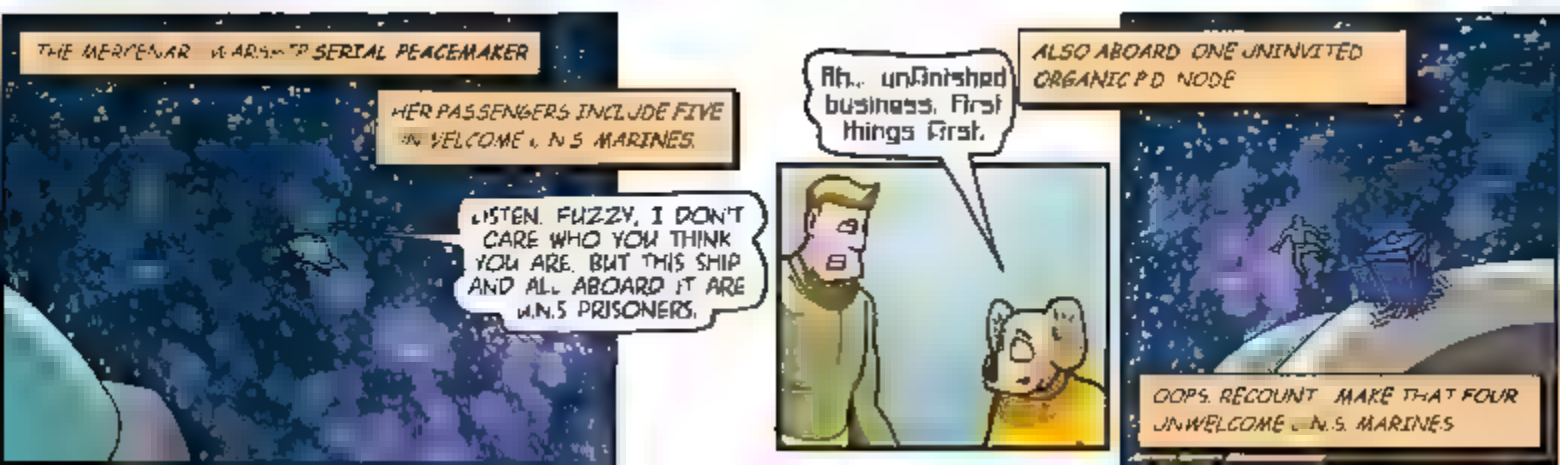

ENNESBY, THE GALAXY IS DOOMED
Maybe the Gavs will be able to get the word out
OUT *WHERE*, EXACTLY? IN THE TIME IT TAKES TO CUT THROUGH THE BUREAUCRACY AND GET ANYTHING *DONE*, THE ANOMALY WILL HAVE CONSUMED HALF THE WORMGATES WE NEED TO COMBAT IT
IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT ADVANTAGE, AND NEVER ABOUT THE GREATER GOOD. GOVERNMENT IS USELESS FOR ANYTHING OUTSIDE OF WARFARE, AND IS ONLY *BARELY* COMPETENT AT THAT
Speaking of which... Ellhoo Elifive, and Celeschul are al being bombarded.
PLEASE TELL ME I CAN'T TAKE CREDIT FOR STARTING *THAT* FIGHT


CAPTAIN THE VREDEFORT HAS MOVED OFF TO DEAL WITH A MORE IMMEDIATE THREAT
AND YOUR LITTLE SQUAD OF THUGS IS SUPPOSED TO BE SAFE WITH US?
THERE ARE THREE BOATS AND HUNDREDS OF DRONES TRACKING YOUR SHIP RIGHT NOW. YOU'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE. AND YOU'LL FIND THAT U.N.S MARINES MAKE POOR HOSTAGES
Captain, would you and the jarhead please have a look at the far screens in the wardroom?
WHEN YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN FLIPPED OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE FIRE, WHAT DO YOU CALL IT WHEN YOU GET FLIPPED AGAIN INTO SOMETHING EVEN WORSE?
I don't know. I'm re-indexing "Frying pan" for a higher baseline, though.

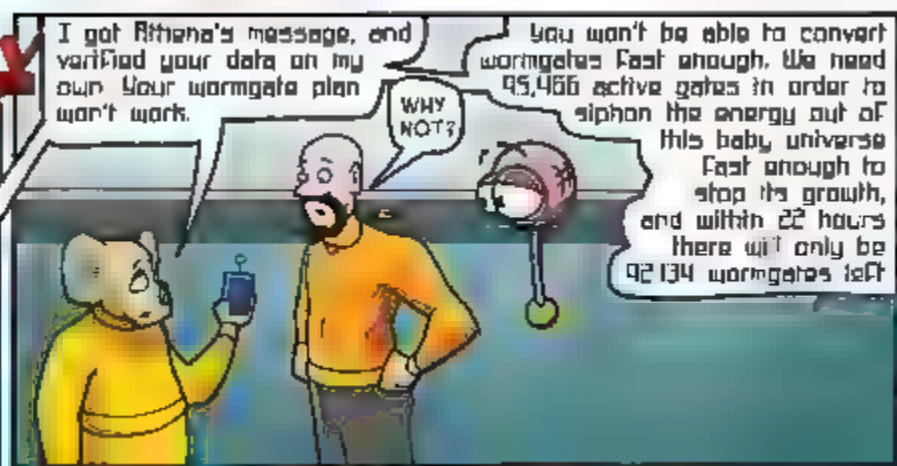

WHOEVER IS ATTACKING THE SYSTEM WANTS A PIECE OF YOU, TOO.
Not 'a' piece. 'THE' piece.
Our 'escorts' have been disabled, and their drones swept aside... but we haven't been fired on.
They want us in ONE piece.
BOOOM
NO, PLEASE GO ON. I'M ALL EARS, EVEN IF THEY ARE RINGING A BIT

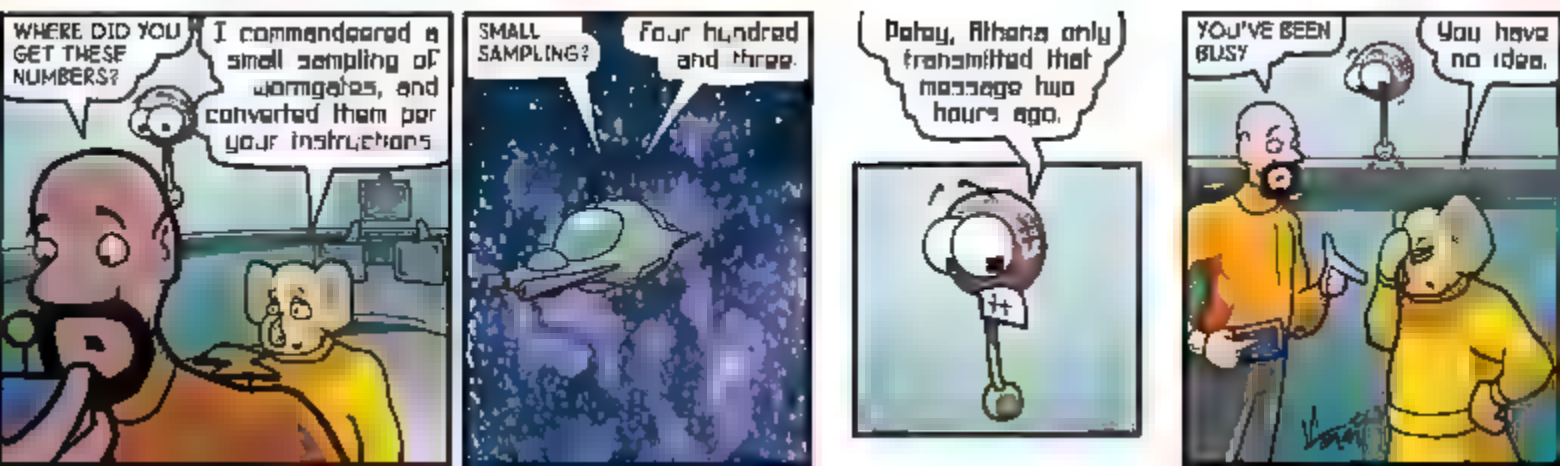
Low-yield kinetic strike to the Fore dorsal turret. Hull breach above the wardroom!
WAIT. DORSAL TURRET ACCESS IS RIGHT UP THERE.
WE'RE IN THE WARDROOM.
I thought I might find you here.
Oh, look who's too all-powerful to stoop to using airlocks.


Consider yourself commandeered, Ennesby. Follow the big ship out of the system.
Right. Sorry, captain.
PETEY, WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?
Isn't it obvious?
WELL .. ALL I CAN FIGURE IS THAT YOU DECIDED TO ATTACK AN *ENTIRE STAR SYSTEM* AS A *FEINT* TO DRAW OFF THE BATTLEPLATE *VREDEFORT*, SO THAT YOU COULD ESCORT US FROM THE SYSTEM WITH MINIMAL COLLATERAL DAMAGE
See? *Obvious.*
"MINIMAL COLLATERAL DAMAGE" AND "ENTIRE STAR SYSTEM" DO **NOT** BELONG IN THE SAME SENTENCE


THE MERCENARY WARSHIP SERIAL PEACEMAKER
HER PASSENGERS INCLUDE FIVE UNWELCOME U.N.S. MARINES.
LISTEN, FUZZY, I DON'T CARE WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE. BUT THIS SHIP AND ALL ABOARD IT ARE U.N.S PRISONERS.
Ah... unfinished business. First things first.
ALSO ABOARD ONE UNINVITED ORGANIC P.D. NODE
OOPS. RECOUNT. MAKE THAT FOUR UNWELCOME U.N.S. MARINES

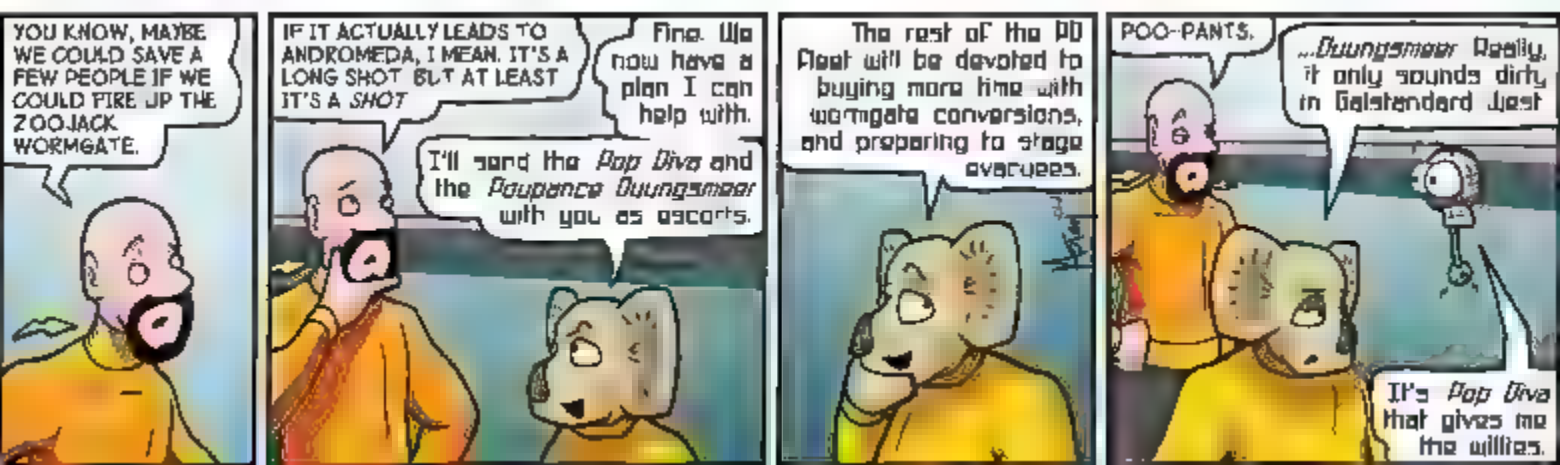
Schlock Mercenary

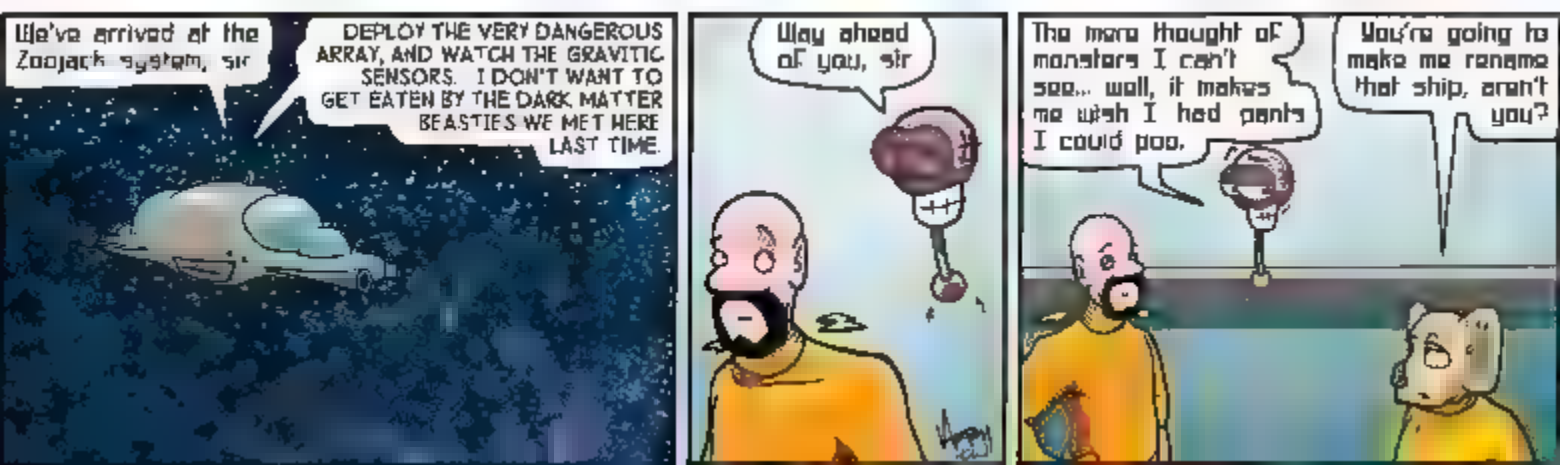


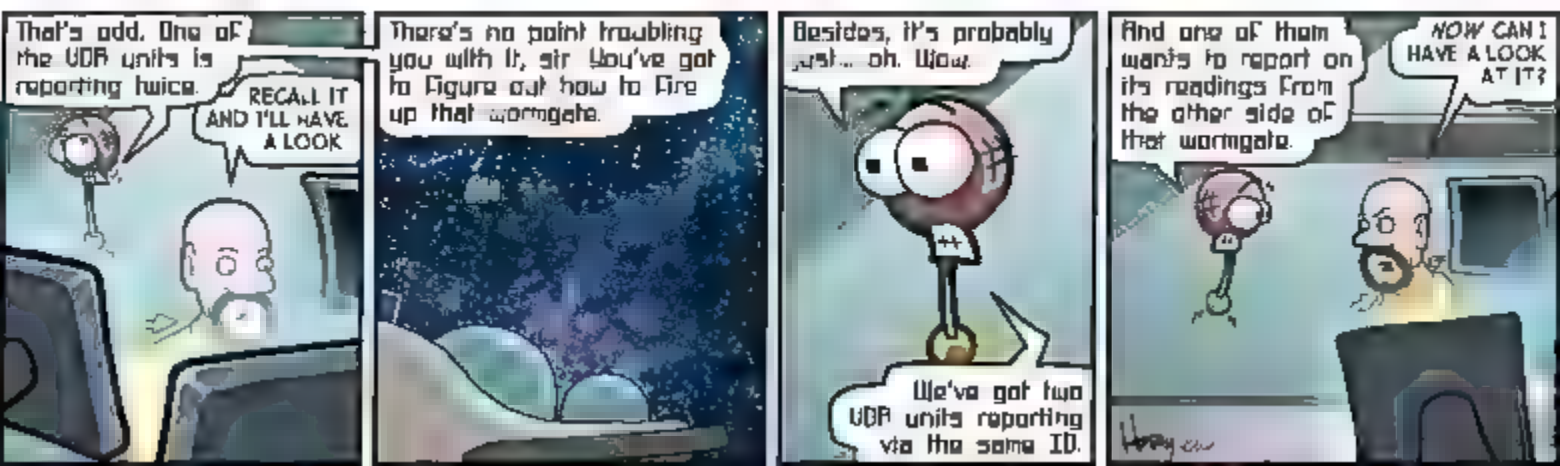

WHERE DID YOU GET THESE NUMBERS?
I commandeered a small sampling of wormgates, and converted them per your instructions
SMALL SAMPLING?
Four hundred and three.
Dobby, Athena only transmitted that message two hours ago.
YOU'VE BEEN BUSY
You have no idea.

PETEY, WE STILL HAVE 22 HOURS.
That's not enough time.
By the time galactic militaries are mobilized, there won't be enough wormgates left for anything other than postponing our doom.
THEN WHY ARE YOU EVEN HERE?
Survival. I need you to think of something else.
No pressure.

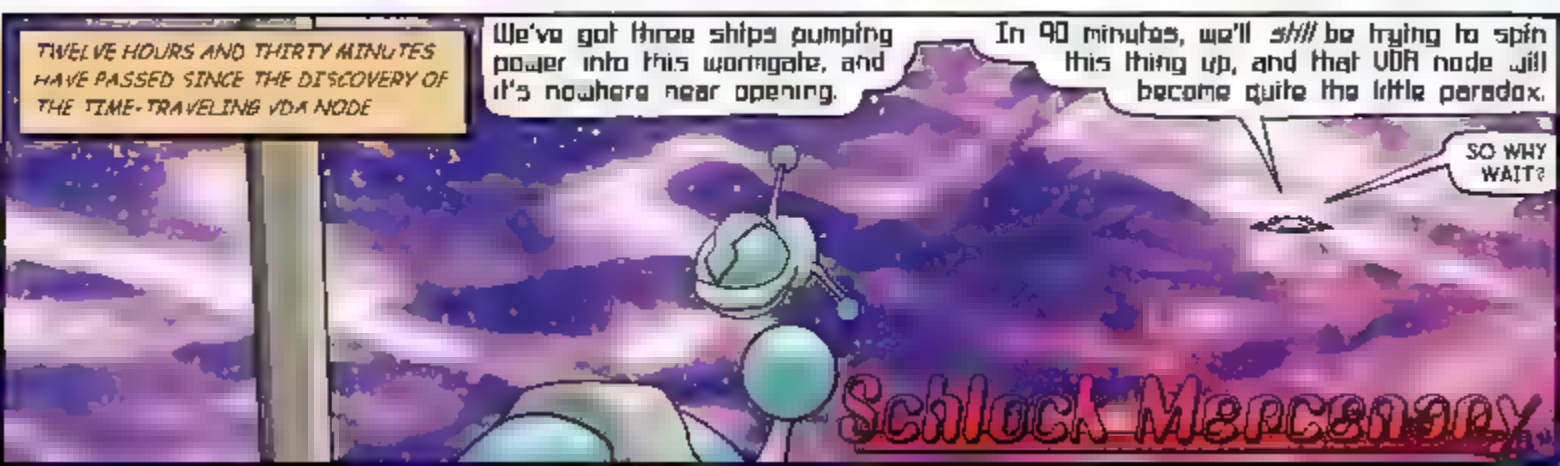
SO.. THE DEATH OF THE WHOLE GALAXY, EH SON?
PRETTY MUCH.
WHY CAN'T WE JUST TERAPORT *OUT* OF THE GALAXY? YOU KNOW RUN AWAY, SAVE WHO AND WHAT WE CAN?
IT'S COMPLICATED
TRY ME. NOT ALL BRASS DULLS WITH AGE.
HYPERSPACE ISN'T SHAPED RIGHT FOR THAT
THAT'S *IT?* WHAT, ARE YOU GOING TO MAKE ME GO READ THE FOOTNOTE?
EASY ON THE FOURTH WALL GUYS WE JUST HAD THAT FIXED

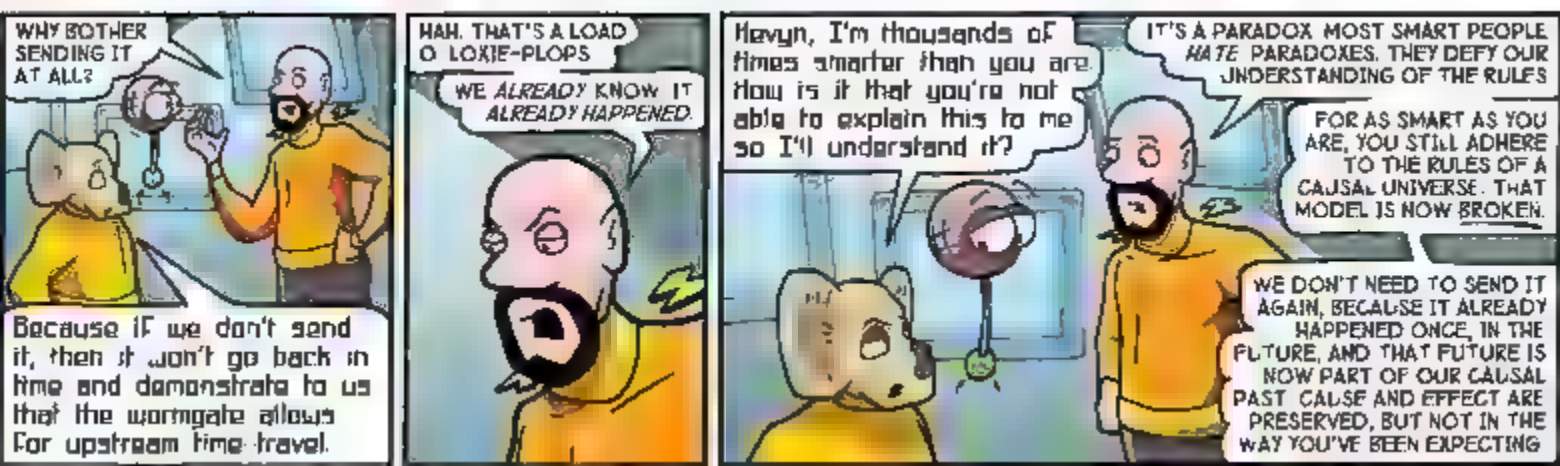

YOU KNOW, MAYBE WE COULD SAVE A FEW PEOPLE IF WE COULD FIRE UP THE ZOOJACK WORMGATE.
IF IT ACTUALLY LEADS TO ANDROMEDA, I MEAN. IT'S A LONG SHOT BUT AT LEAST IT'S A *SHOT*
Fine. We now have a plan I can help with.
I'll send the *Pop Diva* and the *Poupance Duungsmear* with you as escorts.
The rest of the PD fleet will be devoted to buying more time with wormgate conversions, and preparing to stage evacuees.
POO-PANTS.
...*Duungsmear* Really, it only sounds dirty in Galstandard Jest
It's *Pop Diva* that gives me the willies.

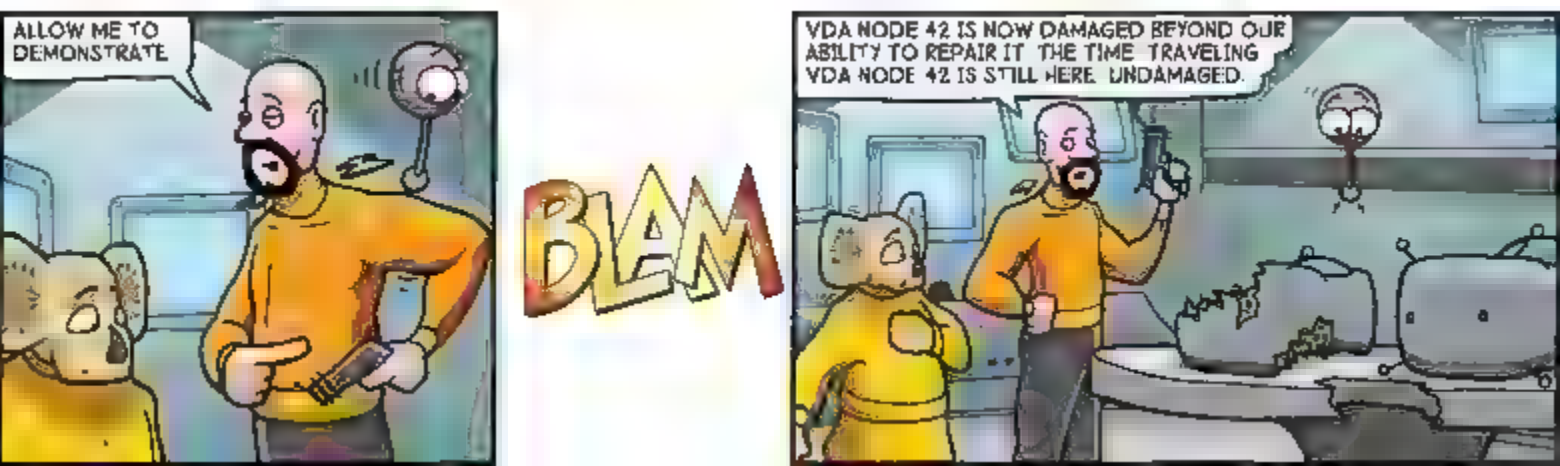

We've arrived at the Zoojack system, sir
DEPLOY THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY, AND WATCH THE GRAVITIC SENSORS. I DON'T WANT TO GET EATEN BY THE DARK MATTER BEASTIES WE MET HERE LAST TIME.
Way ahead of you, sir
The more thought of monsters I can't see... well, it makes me wish I had pants I could poo.
You're going to make me rename that ship, aren't you?


That's odd. One of the UDR units is reporting twice.
RECALL IT AND I'LL HAVE A LOOK
There's no point troubling you with it, sir. You've got to figure out how to fire up that wormgate.
Besides, it's probably just... oh. Wow.
We've got two UDR units reporting via the same ID.
And one of them wants to report on its readings from the other side of that wormgate.
NOW CAN I HAVE A LOOK AT IT?

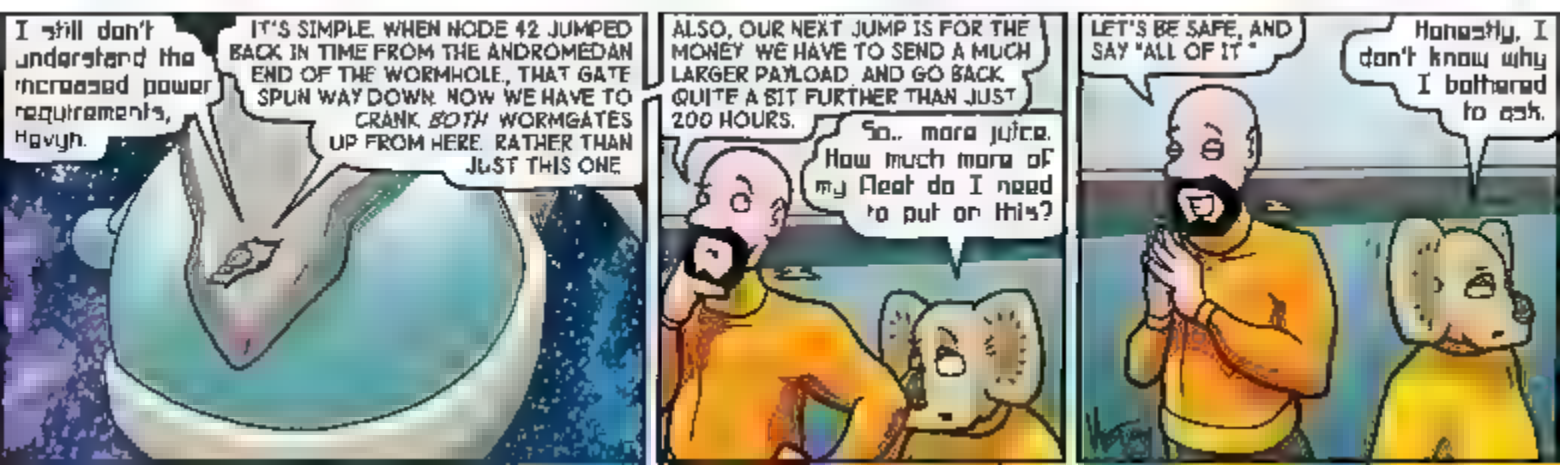
OH, WOW...
WOW.
THIS VDA UNIT WAS SENT BY US, FOURTEEN HOURS FROM NOW THROUGH THAT WORMGATE OUT THERE. ON ITS RETURN TRIP, IT TRAVELED OVER TWO HUNDRED HOURS BACK IN TIME.
YOU KNOW, I THINK WE JUST MIGHT BE ABLE TO SAVE THE GALAXY AFTER ALL.
ELSEWHERE, IN A SETTING COMPLETELY AND MOST ASSUREDLY UNRELATED TO THE STORY BEING TOLD IN THE FIRST THREE PANELS
WHAT'S THIS MOTORCYCLE RAMP DOING RIGHT NEXT TO THE SHARK TANK?


TWELVE HOURS AND THIRTY MINUTES HAVE PASSED SINCE THE DISCOVERY OF THE TIME-TRAVELING VDA NODE
We've got three ships pumping power into this wormgate, and it's nowhere near opening.
In 90 minutes, we'll *still* be trying to spin this thing up, and that VDA node will become quite the little paradox.
SO WHY WAIT?
Schlock Mercenary

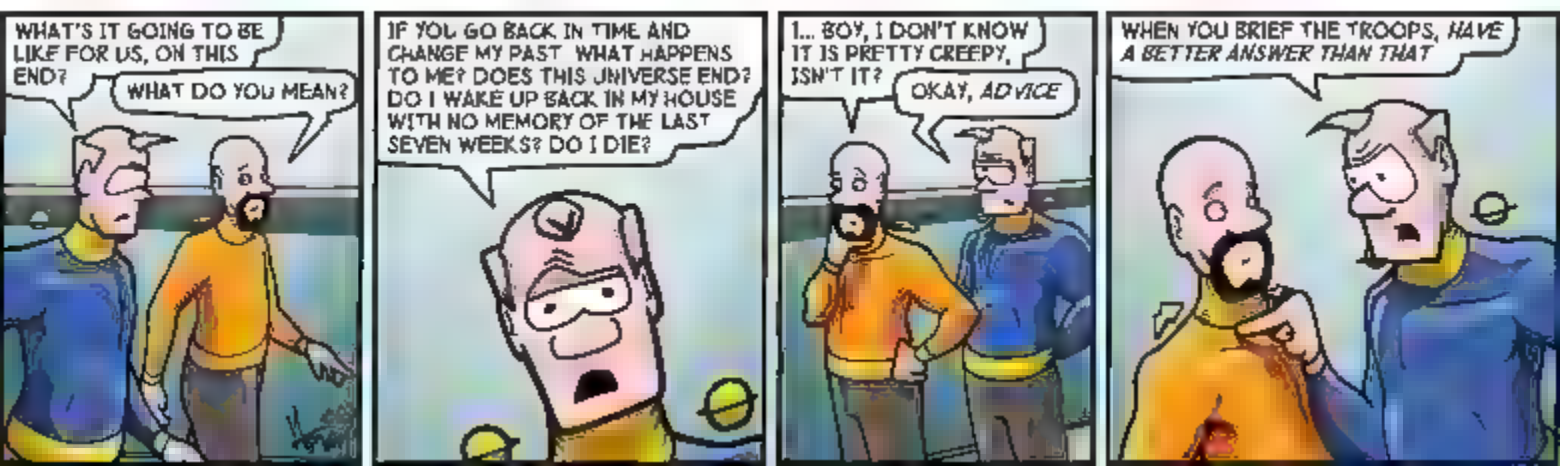

WHY BOTHER SENDING IT AT ALL?
Because if we don't send it, then it won't go back in time and demonstrate to us that the wormgate allows for upstream time travel.
HAH. THAT'S A LOAD O LOXIE-PLOPS
WE ALREADY KNOW IT ALREADY HAPPENED.
Kevyn, I'm thousands of times smarter than you are. How is it that you're not able to explain this to me so I'll understand it?
IT'S A PARADOX. MOST SMART PEOPLE HATE PARADOXES. THEY DEFY OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE RULES
FOR AS SMART AS YOU ARE, YOU STILL ADHERE TO THE RULES OF A CAUSAL UNIVERSE. THAT MODEL IS NOW BROKEN.
WE DON'T NEED TO SEND IT AGAIN, BECAUSE IT ALREADY HAPPENED ONCE, IN THE FUTURE, AND THAT FUTURE IS NOW PART OF OUR CAUSAL PAST. CAUSE AND EFFECT ARE PRESERVED, BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU'VE BEEN EXPECTING

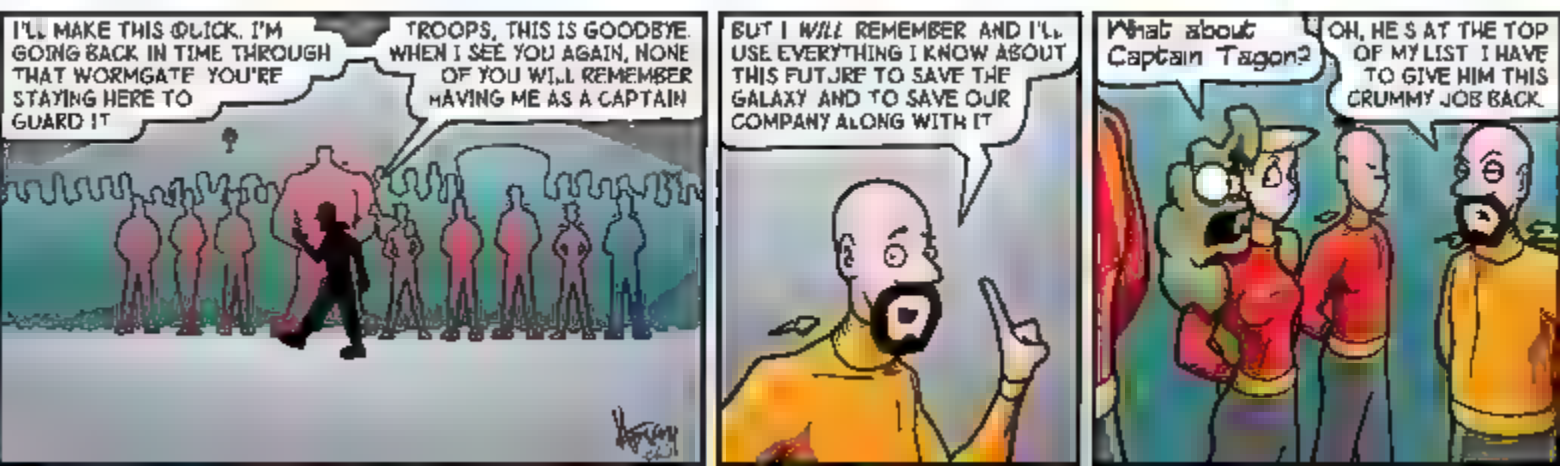

ALLOW ME TO DEMONSTRATE
BLAM
VDA NODE 42 IS NOW DAMAGED BEYOND OUR ABILITY TO REPAIR IT THE TIME TRAVELING VDA NODE 42 IS STILL HERE UNDAMAGED.

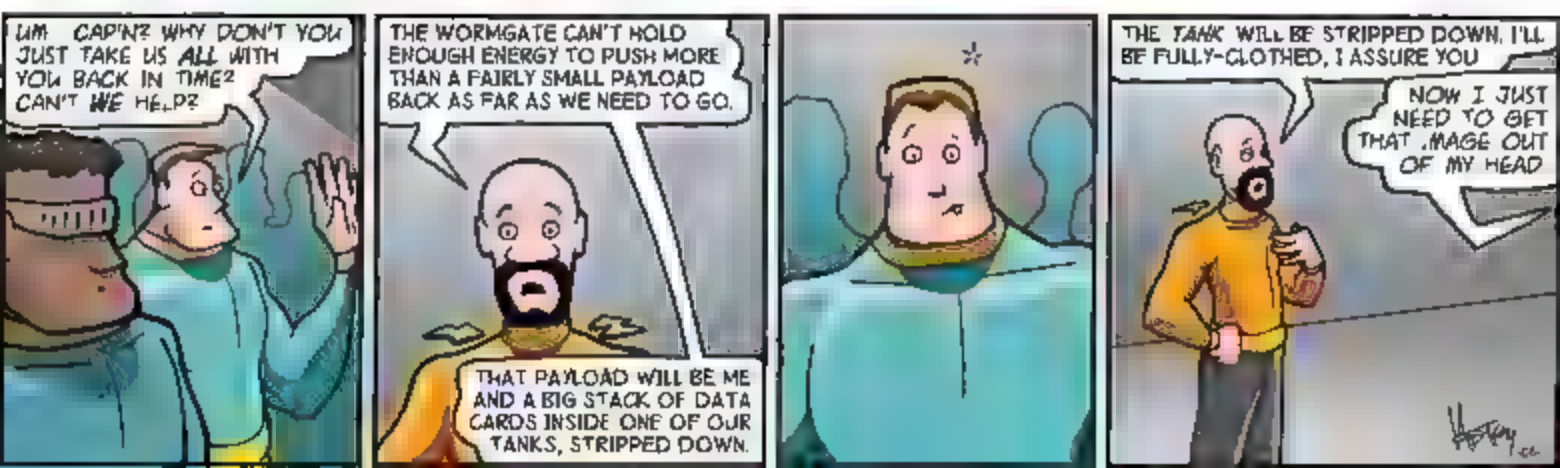
FACE IT PETEY WE'RE TRYING TO CHANGE THE PAST, SO THAT THIS EVENT IN THE GALACTIC CORE NEVER HAPPENED THAT EVENT IS WHAT S MAKING TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE IN THE FIRST PLACE
WITHOUT PARADOXICAL CAUSALITY WE CAN'T SUCCEED
Okay, confession time. When you fired, I was genuinely frightened for the first time in this whole affair.
YOU CALL THAT A CONFESSION?
HERE'S A REAL CONFESSION
SO WAS I.
BUT HEY, NOW WE KNOW IT WORKS. RIGHT?


I still don't understand the increased power requirements, Havyn.
IT'S SIMPLE. WHEN NODE 42 JUMPED BACK IN TIME FROM THE ANDROMEDAN END OF THE WORMHOLE, THAT GATE SPUN WAY DOWN. NOW WE HAVE TO CRANK *BOTH* WORMGATES UP FROM HERE. RATHER THAN JUST THIS ONE.
ALSO, OUR NEXT JUMP IS FOR THE MONEY. WE HAVE TO SEND A MUCH LARGER PAYLOAD AND GO BACK QUITE A BIT FURTHER THAN JUST 200 HOURS.
So... more juice. How much more of my fleet do I need to put on this?
LET'S BE SAFE, AND SAY "ALL OF IT."
Honestly, I don't know why I bothered to ask.

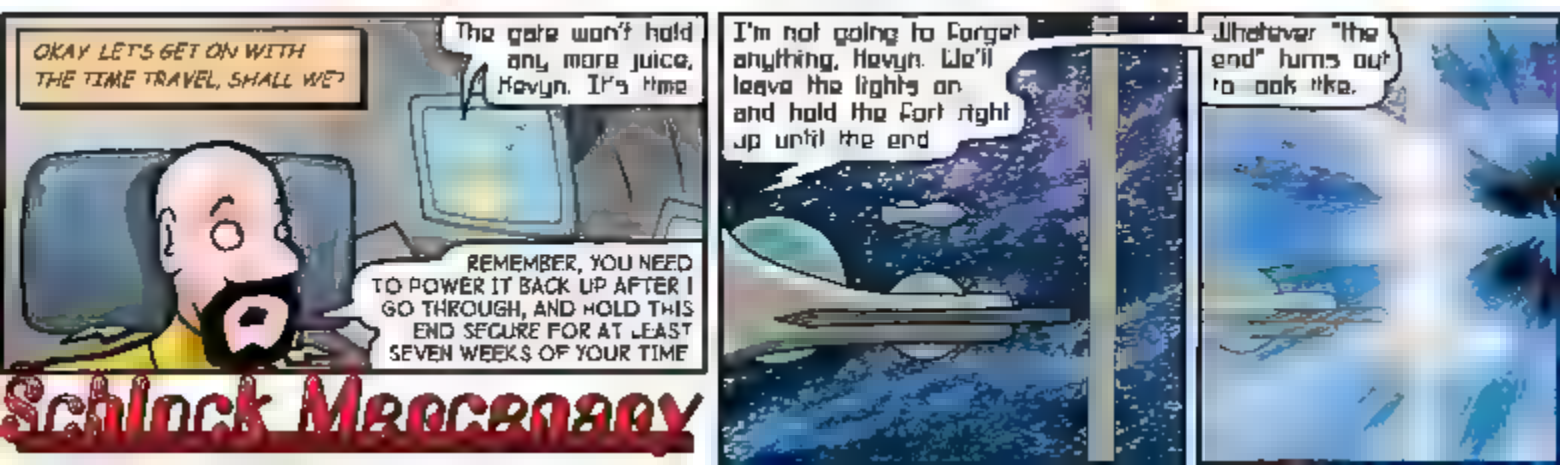
HERE'S OUR PLAN, GENERAL. I'M GOING TO TAKE A TANK LOADED WITH EVERYTHING WE KNOW TO DATE AND GO THROUGH THIS WORMGATE.
AFTER A PREDETERMINED WAIT I'LL COME BACK THROUGH AND I'LL ARRIVE HERE ALMOST SEVEN WEEKS AGO.
THAT SHOULD GIVE ME SUFFICIENT TIME TO STOP THE GALACTIC CORE EVENT, *AND* TO PREVENT YOUR SON FROM LEAVING ON HIS ILL FATED FINAL MISSION.
NOW I NEED YOUR ADVICE.
I DON'T KNOW TIME TRAVEL FROM TIDDLYWINKS. WHAT GOOD IS MY ADVICE GOING TO BE?
WELL... IF IT WORKS, YOU AND I WILL NEVER MEET. THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO TELL ME HOW THE COMPANY OUGHT TO BE RUN.
AM I SUPPOSED TO BE FLATTERED OR FREAKED OUT RIGHT NOW?

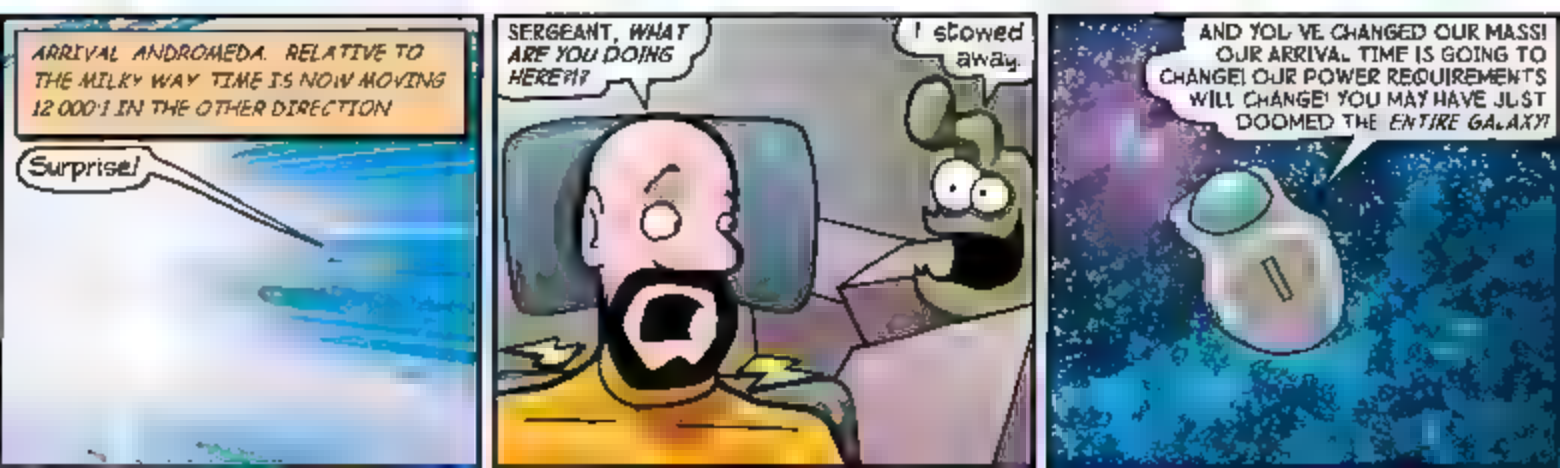

WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE LIKE FOR US, ON THIS END?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
IF YOU GO BACK IN TIME AND CHANGE MY PAST WHAT HAPPENS TO ME? DOES THIS UNIVERSE END? DO I WAKE UP BACK IN MY HOUSE WITH NO MEMORY OF THE LAST SEVEN WEEKS? DO I DIE?
I... BOY, I DON'T KNOW IT IS PRETTY CREEPY, ISN'T IT?
OKAY, *ADVICE*
WHEN YOU BRIEF THE TROOPS, *HAVE A BETTER ANSWER THAN THAT*

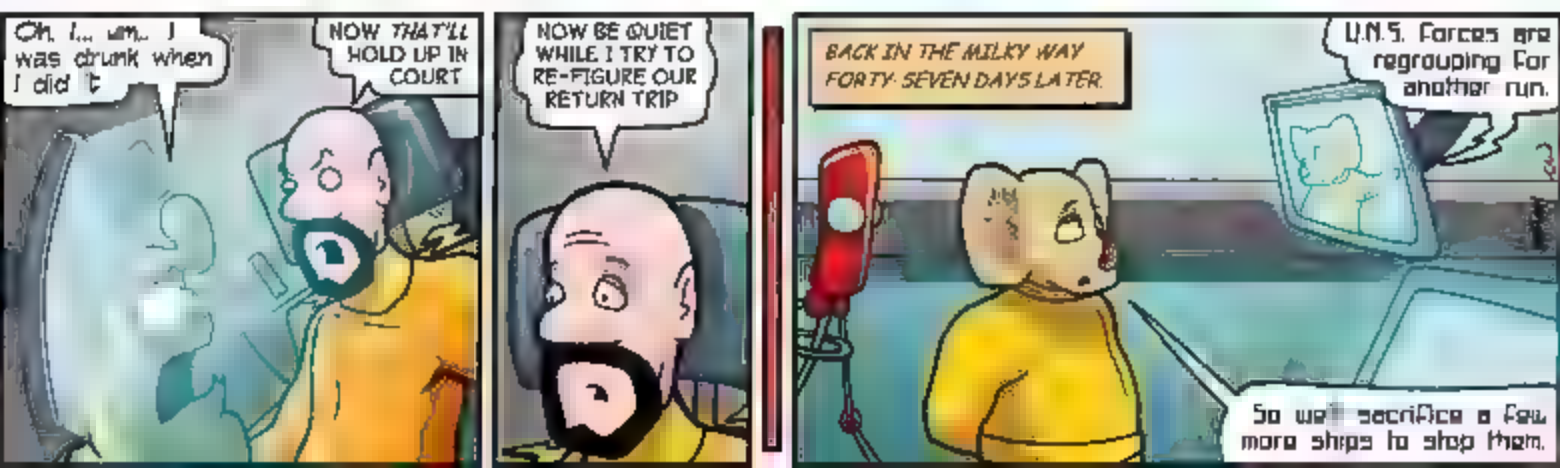

I'LL MAKE THIS QUICK. I'M GOING BACK IN TIME THROUGH THAT WORMGATE. YOU'RE STAYING HERE TO GUARD IT.
TROOPS, THIS IS GOODBYE. WHEN I SEE YOU AGAIN, NONE OF YOU WILL REMEMBER HAVING ME AS A CAPTAIN.
BUT I *WILL* REMEMBER AND I'LL USE EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT THIS FUTURE TO SAVE THE GALAXY AND TO SAVE OUR COMPANY ALONG WITH IT.
What about Captain Tagon?
OH, HE'S AT THE TOP OF MY LIST. I HAVE TO GIVE HIM THIS CRUMMY JOB BACK.

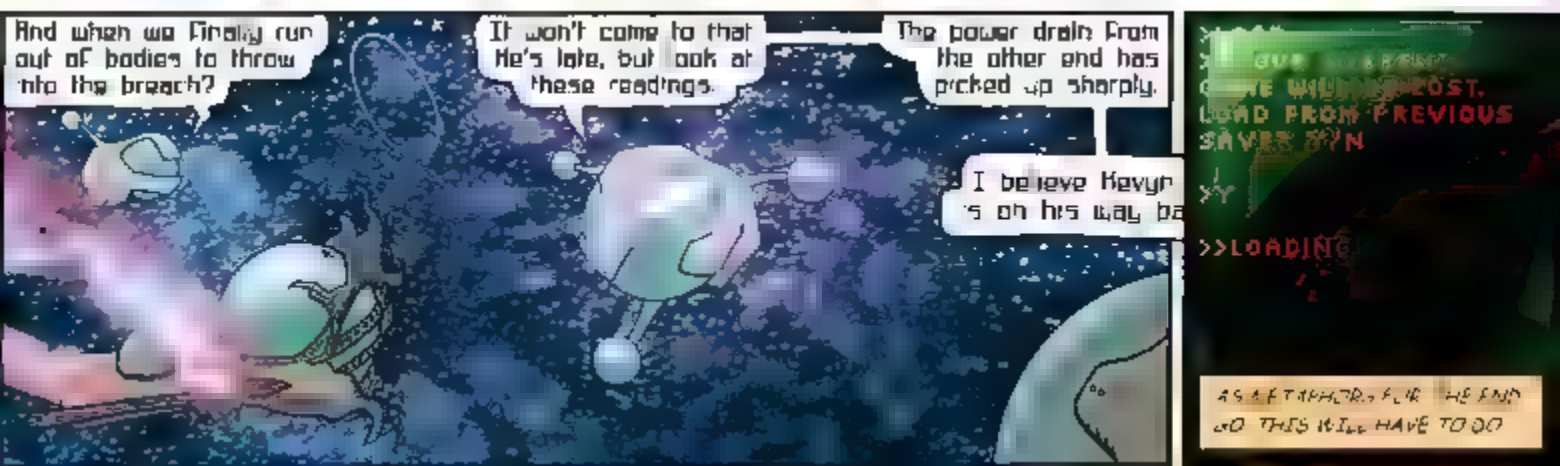

UM CAP'N? WHY DON'T YOU JUST TAKE US ALL WITH YOU BACK IN TIME? CAN'T WE HELP?
THE WORMGATE CAN'T HOLD ENOUGH ENERGY TO PUSH MORE THAN A FAIRLY SMALL PAYLOAD BACK AS FAR AS WE NEED TO GO.
THAT PAYLOAD WILL BE ME AND A BIG STACK OF DATA CARDS INSIDE ONE OF OUR TANKS, STRIPPED DOWN.
THE TANK WILL BE STRIPPED DOWN. I'LL BE FULLY-CLOTHED, I ASSURE YOU
NOW I JUST NEED TO GET THAT IMAGE OUT OF MY HEAD

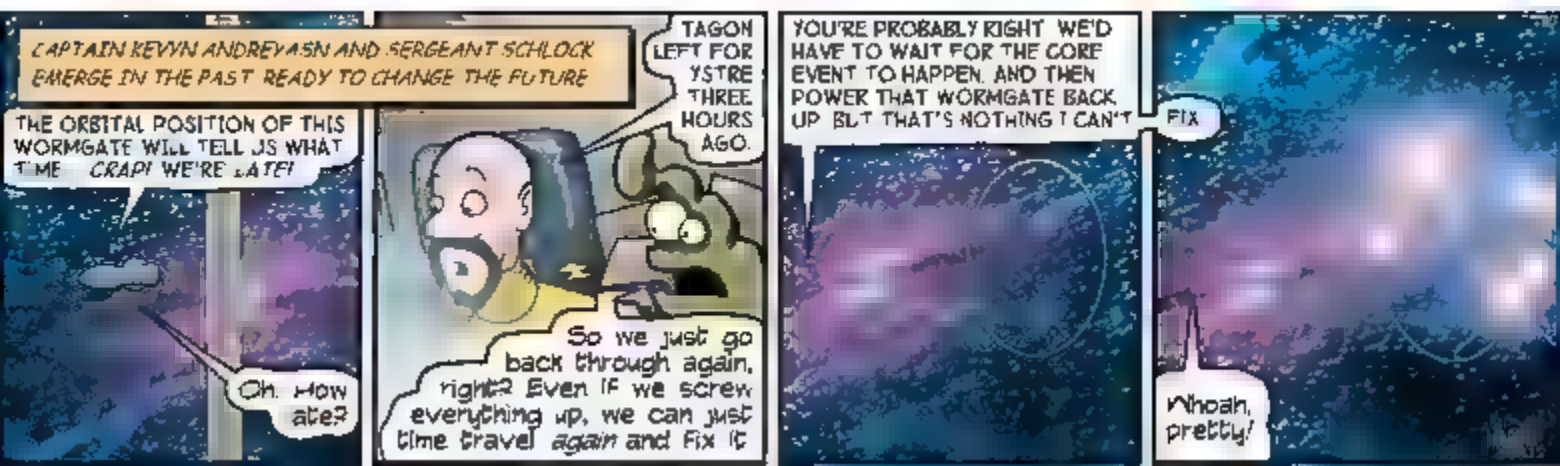
I don't WANT to forget everything. I played that game already.
Gimme a pitcher of ovalkwik.
WHAT KIND OF MILK DO YOU WANT? BACTO, SOY, OR THE EXPENSIVE "SKIM" STUFF?
Tequila.
THE DOCTOR LEFT ME EXPRESS INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING THE MIXTURE OF OVALKWIK AND TEQUILA SHE SAID
" TWO DRINK LIMIT?"
If a pitcher counts as one, then sure.

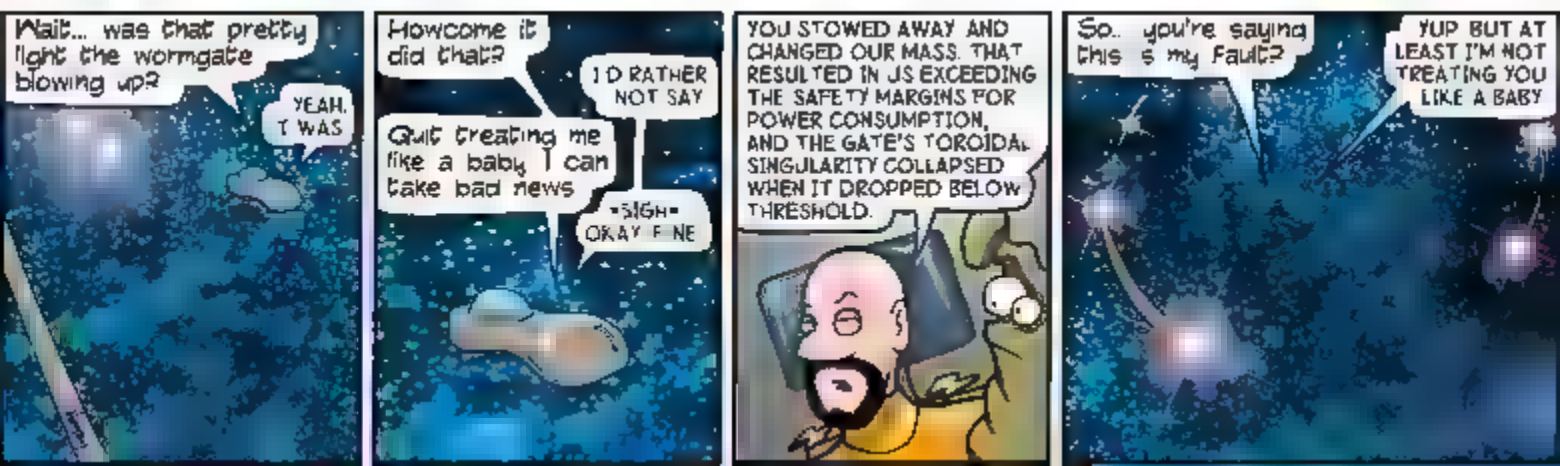

OKAY LET'S GET ON WITH THE TIME TRAVEL, SHALL WE?
The gate won't hold any more juice, Kevyn. It's time
REMEMBER, YOU NEED TO POWER IT BACK UP AFTER I GO THROUGH, AND HOLD THIS END SECURE FOR AT LEAST SEVEN WEEKS OF YOUR TIME
Schlock Mercenary
I'm not going to forget anything, Kevyn. We'll leave the lights on and hold the fort right up until the end
Whatever "the end" turns out to look like.

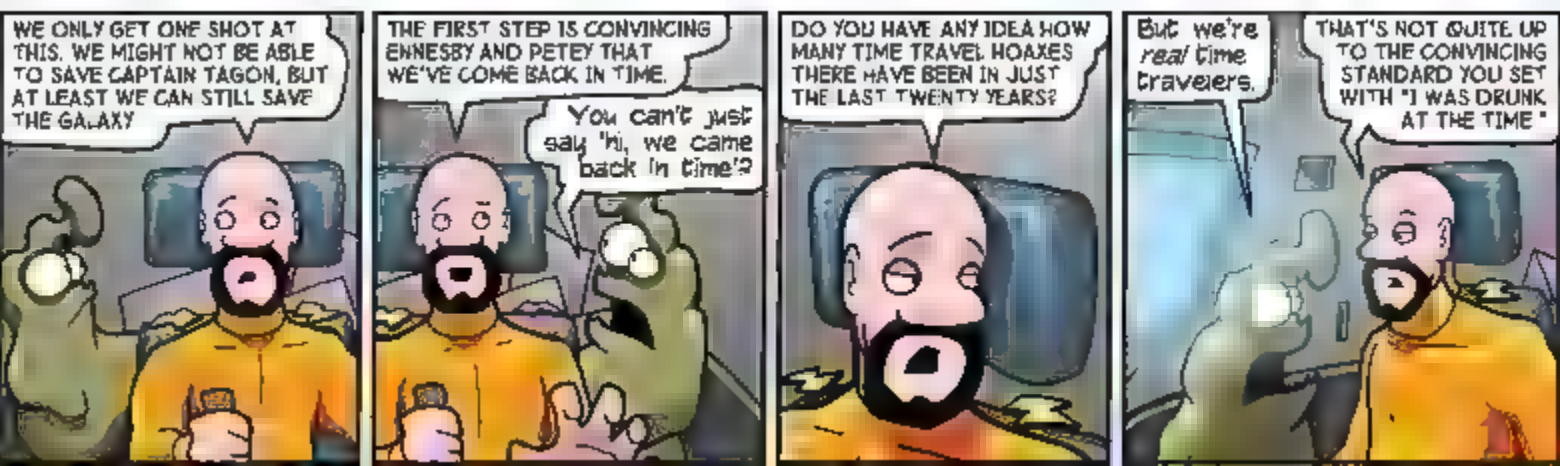

ARRIVAL ANDROMEDA. RELATIVE TO THE MILKY WAY TIME IS NOW MOVING 12 000:1 IN THE OTHER DIRECTION
Surprise!
SERGEANT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!?
I stowed away.
AND YOU VE CHANGED OUR MASS! OUR ARRIVAL TIME IS GOING TO CHANGE! OUR POWER REQUIREMENTS WILL CHANGE! YOU MAY HAVE JUST DOOMED THE ENTIRE GALAXY!


Oh, I... um... I was drunk when I did it
NOW THAT'LL HOLD UP IN COURT
NOW BE QUIET WHILE I TRY TO RE-FIGURE OUR RETURN TRIP
BACK IN THE MILKY WAY FORTY-SEVEN DAYS LATER.
U.N.S. Forces are regrouping for another run.
So we sacrifice a few more ships to stop them.

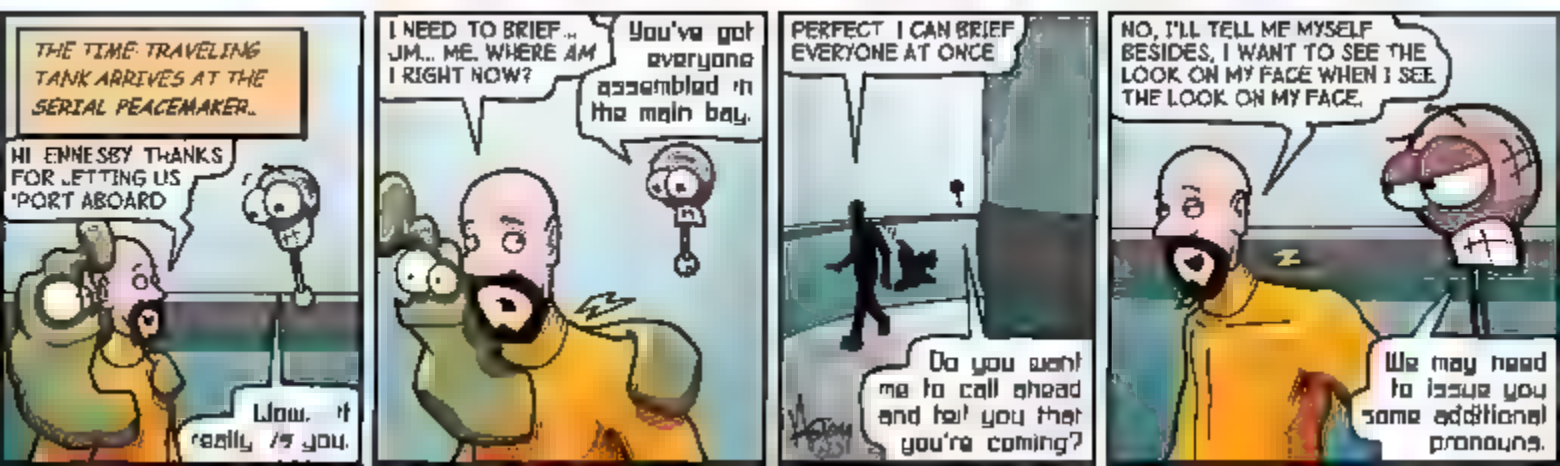

And when we finally run out of bodies to throw into the breach?
It won't come to that. He's late, but look at these readings.
The power drain from the other end has picked up sharply.
I believe Kevyn is on his way ba
LOAD FROM PREVIOUS
>>LOADING
AS A FITTING FOR THE END
WO THIS WILL HAVE TO DO

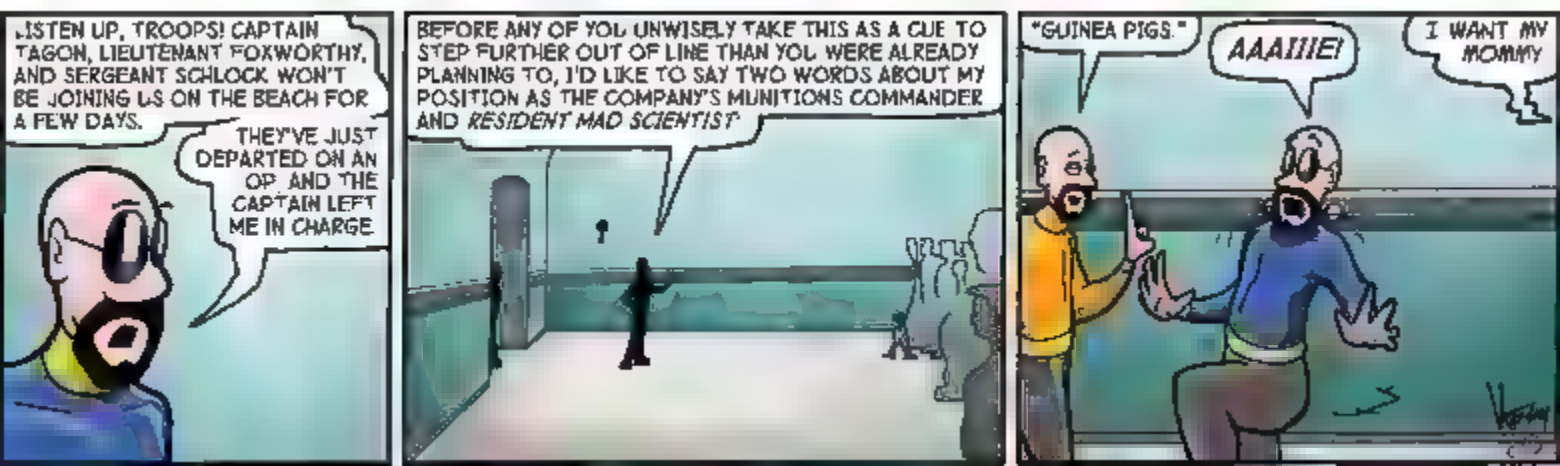

CAPTAIN KEVYN ANDREVASN AND SERGEANT SCHLOCK EMERGE IN THE PAST READY TO CHANGE THE FUTURE
THE ORBITAL POSITION OF THIS WORMGATE WILL TELL US WHAT TIME CRAP! WE'RE LATE!
Oh. How late?
TAGON LEFT FOR YSTRE THREE HOURS AGO.
So we just go back through again, right? Even IF we screw everything up, we can just time travel again and fix it
YOU'RE PROBABLY RIGHT WE'D HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE CORE EVENT TO HAPPEN, AND THEN POWER THAT WORMGATE BACK UP BUT THAT'S NOTHING I CAN'T
FIX
Whoah, pretty!


Wait... was that pretty light the wormgate blowing up?
YEAH, I WAS
Howcome it did that?
I'D RATHER NOT SAY
Quit treating me like a baby I can take bad news
SIGH OKAY FINE
YOU STOWED AWAY AND CHANGED OUR MASS. THAT RESULTED IN JS EXCEEDING THE SAFETY MARGINS FOR POWER CONSUMPTION, AND THE GATE'S TOROIDAL SINGULARITY COLLAPSED WHEN IT DROPPED BELOW THRESHOLD.
So.. you're saying this is my fault?
YUP BUT AT LEAST I'M NOT TREATING YOU LIKE A BABY

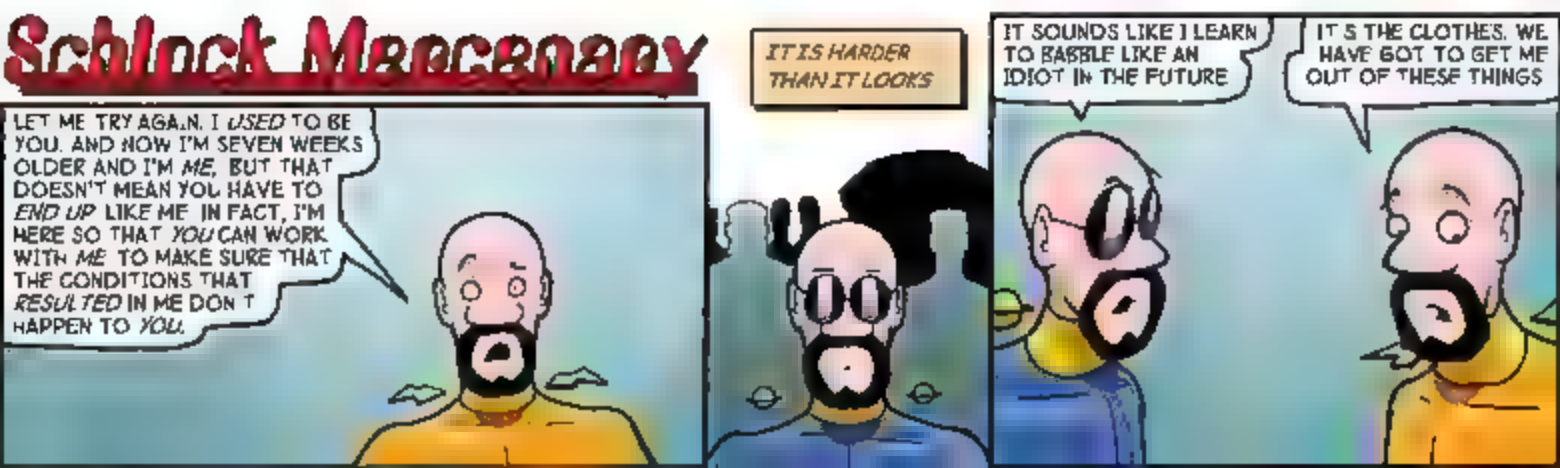

WE ONLY GET ONE SHOT AT THIS. WE MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO SAVE CAPTAIN TAGON, BUT AT LEAST WE CAN STILL SAVE THE GALAXY
THE FIRST STEP IS CONVINCING ENNESBY AND PETEY THAT WE'VE COME BACK IN TIME.
You can't just say 'hi, we came back in time'?
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY TIME TRAVEL HOAXES THERE HAVE BEEN IN JUST THE LAST TWENTY YEARS?
But we're real time travelers.
THAT'S NOT QUITE UP TO THE CONVINCING STANDARD YOU SET WITH "I WAS DRUNK AT THE TIME."

PETEY AND I DISCUSSED THIS PROBLEM AT LENGTH BEFORE I LEFT THE BEST WAY TO PROVE YOU'RE TRAVELING BACKWARDS IN TIME IS TO BRING A I GESTALTS WITH YOU
PETEY, ATHENA ENNESBY, LUNESBY, AND VREDEFORT ARE ALL HERE WITH US, ALONG WITH A DOZEN OTHERS PETEY TALKED TO BEFORE I LEFT
Isn't *Vredefort* a battleplate? How did Petey get a gestalt off of a *battleplate?*
I DIDN'T ASK, AND ALL HE SAID WAS "IN FOR A PENNY IN FOR PLUTONIUM."


THE TIME TRAVELING TANK ARRIVES AT THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER.
HI ENNESBY THANKS FOR LETTING US PORT ABOARD
Wow. It really is you.
I NEED TO BRIEF... UM... ME. WHERE AM I RIGHT NOW?
You've got everyone assembled in the main bay.
PERFECT I CAN BRIEF EVERYONE AT ONCE
Do you want me to call ahead and tell you that you're coming?
NO, I'LL TELL ME MYSELF BESIDES, I WANT TO SEE THE LOOK ON MY FACE WHEN I SEE THE LOOK ON MY FACE.
We may need to issue you some additional pronouns.

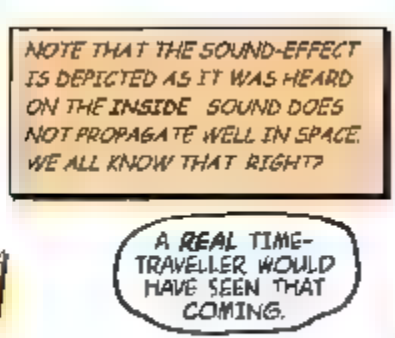

LISTEN UP, TROOPS! CAPTAIN TAGON, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY, AND SERGEANT SCHLOCK WON'T BE JOINING US ON THE BEACH FOR A FEW DAYS.
THEY'VE JUST DEPARTED ON AN OP, AND THE CAPTAIN LEFT ME IN CHARGE.
BEFORE ANY OF YOU UNWISELY TAKE THIS AS A CUE TO STEP FURTHER OUT OF LINE THAN YOU WERE ALREADY PLANNING TO, I'D LIKE TO SAY TWO WORDS ABOUT MY POSITION AS THE COMPANY'S MUNITIONS COMMANDER AND *RESIDENT MAD SCIENTIST*.
"GUINEA PIGS."
AAAIIIE!
I WANT MY MOMMY

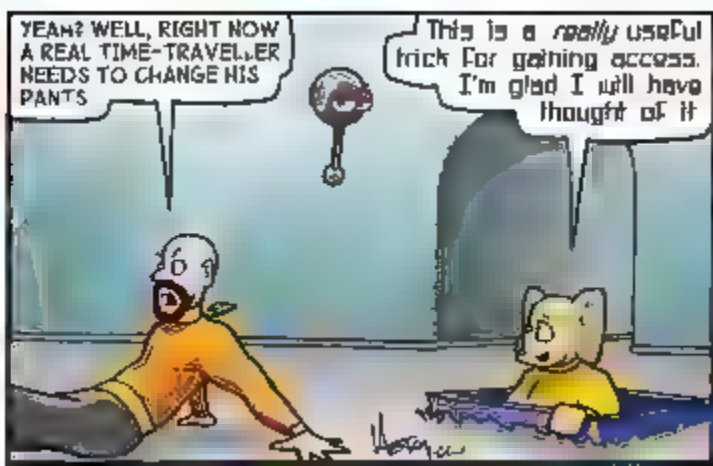
AT SOME POINT WE HAVE EACH IMAGINED GOING BACK IN TIME TO TALK TO OURSELVES. CAPTAIN ANDREYASN IS ACTUALLY DOING IT
HI, KEVYN I M YOU.
OKAY, THAT'S NOT QUITE TRUE. I'M YOU AS YOU'LL BE SEVEN WEEKS FROM NOW
I'M GOING TO BE CAPTAIN?
YES.
ERR... NO
MAYBE

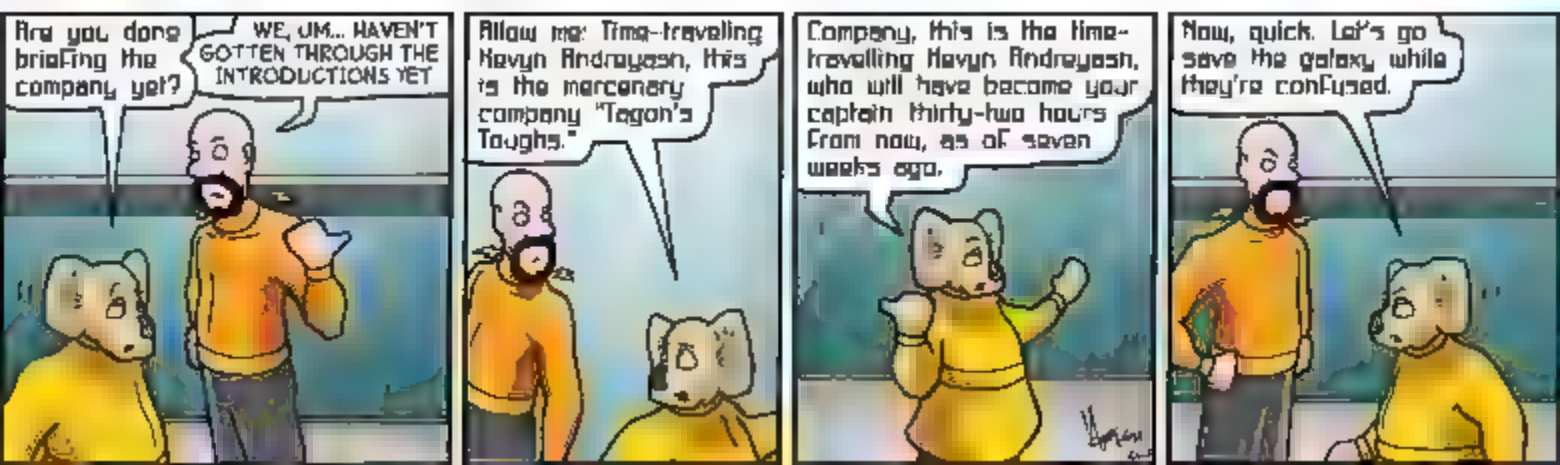

Schlock Mercenary
LET ME TRY AGAIN. I *USED* TO BE YOU. AND NOW I'M SEVEN WEEKS OLDER AND I'M *ME*, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO *END UP* LIKE ME. IN FACT, I'M HERE SO THAT *YOU* CAN WORK WITH *ME* TO MAKE SURE THAT THE CONDITIONS THAT *RESULTED* IN ME DON'T HAPPEN TO *YOU*.
IT IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS
IT SOUNDS LIKE I LEARN TO BABBLE LIKE AN IDIOT IN THE FUTURE
IT'S THE CLOTHES. WE HAVE GOT TO GET ME OUT OF THESE THINGS

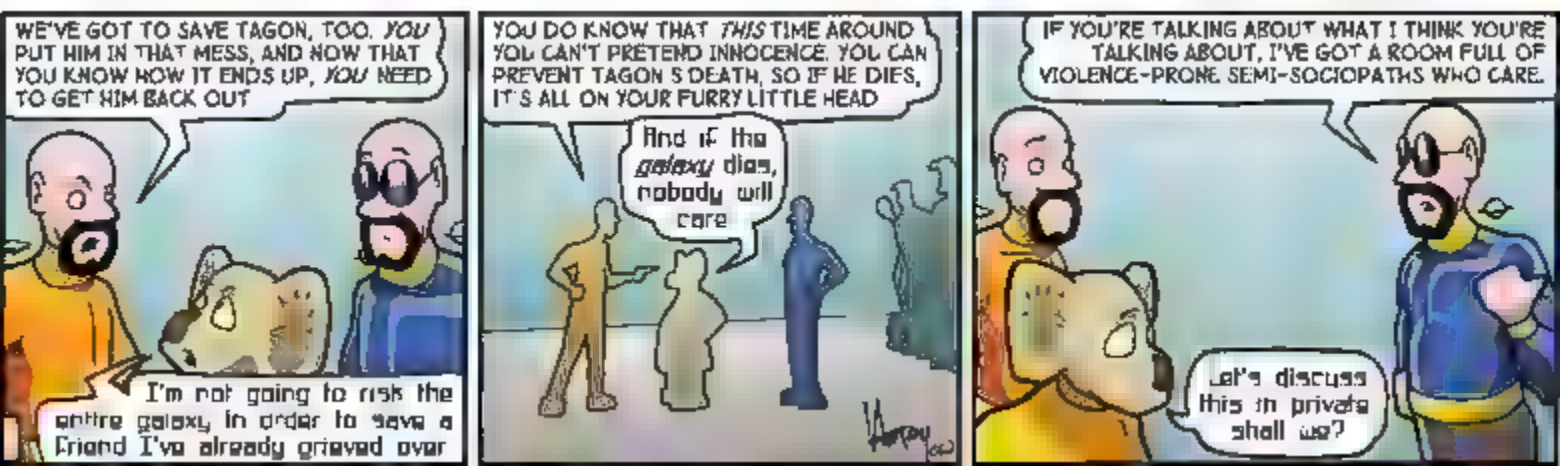
COMMANDER, DO YOU WANT ME TO SHOOT THE YOU WEARING THE ORANGE SHIRT AND THE NO GLASSES?
NICK, PUT THE MULTI-CANNON AWAY WE DON'T WANT TO ACCIDENT
BOOM
A REAL TIME-TRAVELLER WOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING

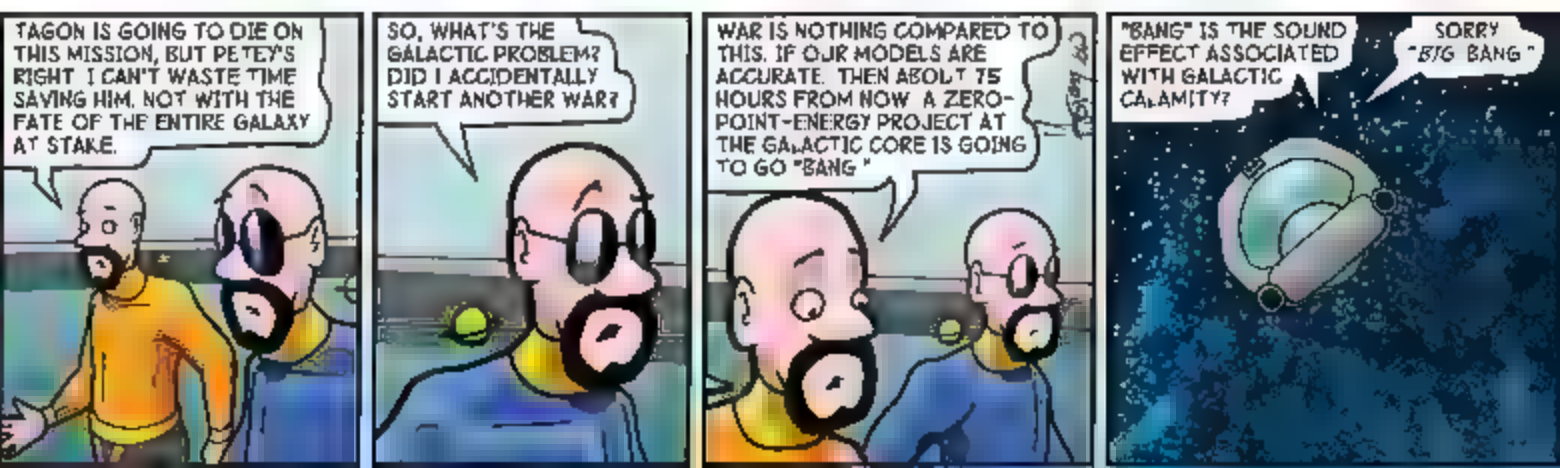
AND NOW A VIEW FROM THE OUTSIDE
BOOOM


NOTE THAT THE SOUND-EFFECT IS DEPICTED AS IT WAS HEARD ON THE INSIDE SOUND DOES NOT PROPAGATE WELL IN SPACE. WE ALL KNOW THAT RIGHT?
A REAL TIME-TRAVELLER WOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING.

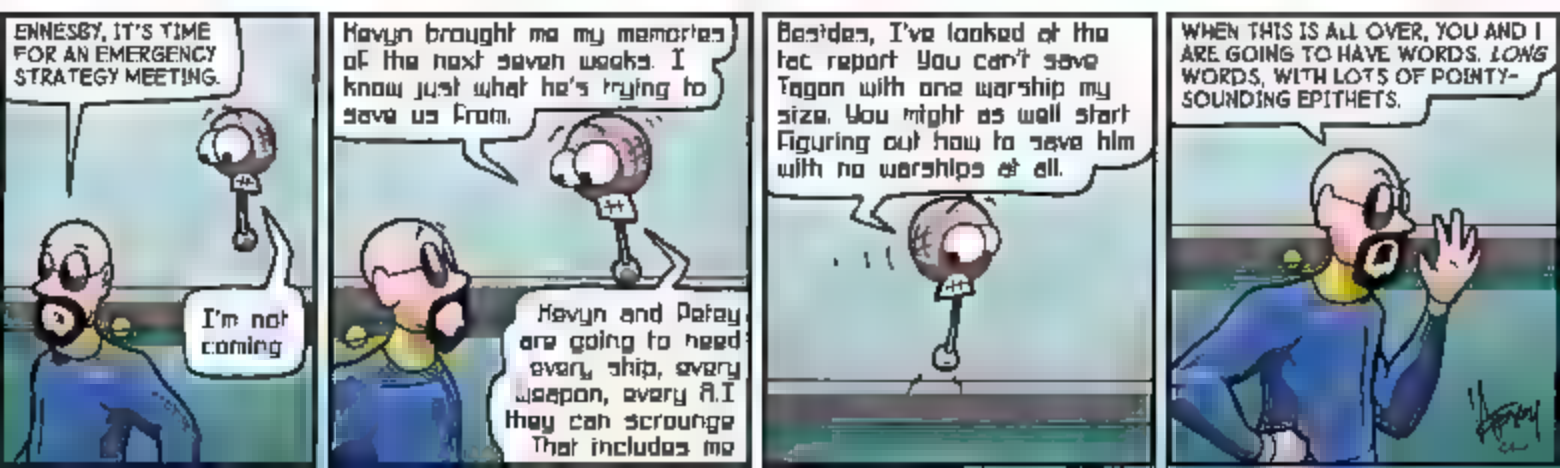

YEAH? WELL, RIGHT NOW A REAL TIME-TRAVELLER NEEDS TO CHANGE HIS PANTS
This is a really useful trick for gaining access. I'm glad I will have thought of it


Are you done briefing the company yet?
WE, UM... HAVEN'T GOTTEN THROUGH THE INTRODUCTIONS YET
Allow me: Time-traveling Havyn Andrayash, this is the mercenary company "Tagon's Toughs."
Company, this is the time-travelling Havyn Andrayash, who will have become your captain thirty-two hours from now, as of seven weeks ago.
Now, quick. Let's go save the galaxy, while they're confused.

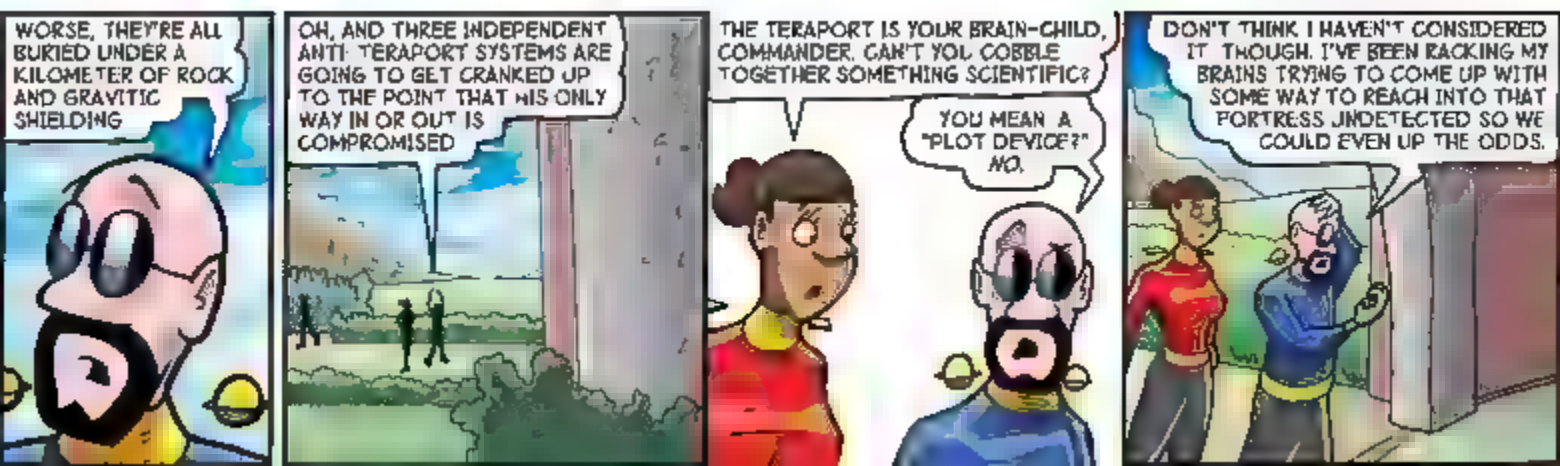

WE'VE GOT TO SAVE TAGON, TOO. *YOU* PUT HIM IN THAT MESS, AND NOW THAT YOU KNOW HOW IT ENDS UP, *YOU* NEED TO GET HIM BACK OUT
I'm not going to risk the entire galaxy in order to save a friend I've already grieved over
YOU DO KNOW THAT *THIS* TIME AROUND YOU CAN'T PRETEND INNOCENCE. YOU CAN PREVENT TAGON'S DEATH, SO IF HE DIES, IT'S ALL ON YOUR FURRY LITTLE HEAD
And if the *galaxy* dies, nobody will care
IF YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT WHAT I THINK YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, I'VE GOT A ROOM FULL OF VIOLENCE-PRONE, SEMI-SOCIOPATHS WHO CARE.
Let's discuss this in private shall we?


TAGON IS GOING TO DIE ON THIS MISSION, BUT PETEY'S RIGHT I CAN'T WASTE TIME SAVING HIM. NOT WITH THE FATE OF THE ENTIRE GALAXY AT STAKE.
SO, WHAT'S THE GALACTIC PROBLEM? DID I ACCIDENTALLY START ANOTHER WAR?
WAR IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THIS. IF OUR MODELS ARE ACCURATE. THEN ABOUT 75 HOURS FROM NOW A ZERO-POINT-ENERGY PROJECT AT THE GALACTIC CORE IS GOING TO GO "BANG."
"BANG" IS THE SOUND EFFECT ASSOCIATED WITH GALACTIC CALAMITY?
SORRY "BIG BANG."

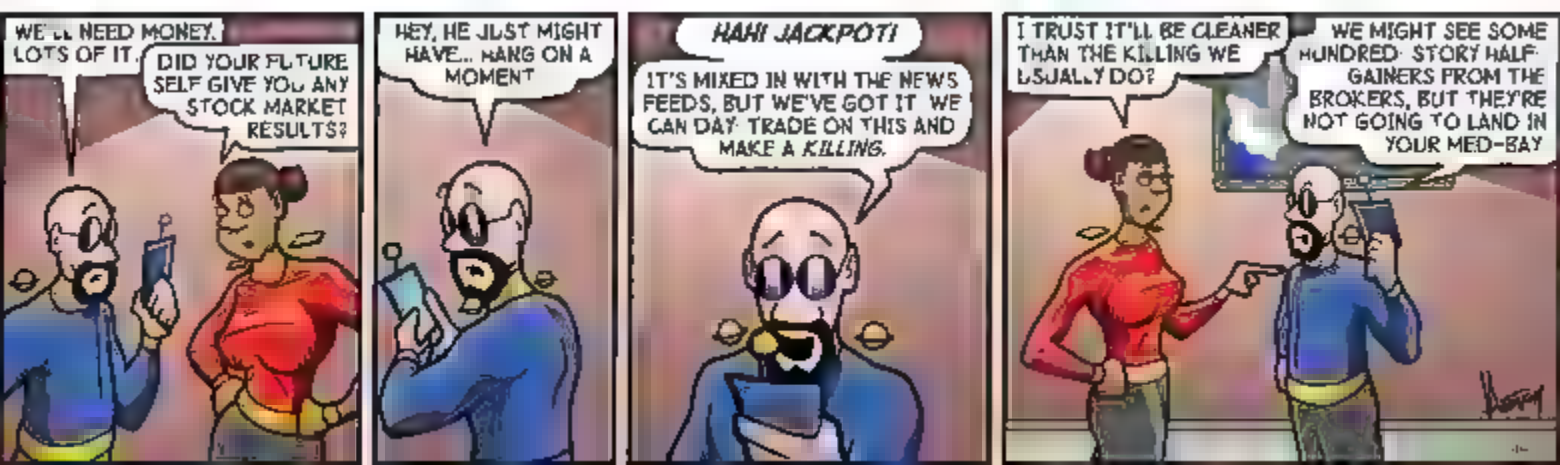
Havyn, just hand yourself your notes, and let's GO. I'm peppering the Galactic Core with probes as we speak, and I need you to help me interpret what we're seeing.
•SIGH• OKAY FINE.
HERE. IT'S EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED ON TAGON'S MISSION. EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT THE NEXT SEVEN WEEKS TOO.
PLEASE GET THIS RIGHT I REALLY MISS HIM.
HEY WHEN YOU WANT SOMETHING DONE RIGHT DO IT YOURSELF
AND IF THAT S NOT ENOUGH, GO BACK IN TIME AND TELL YOURSELF TO TRY IT AGAIN.

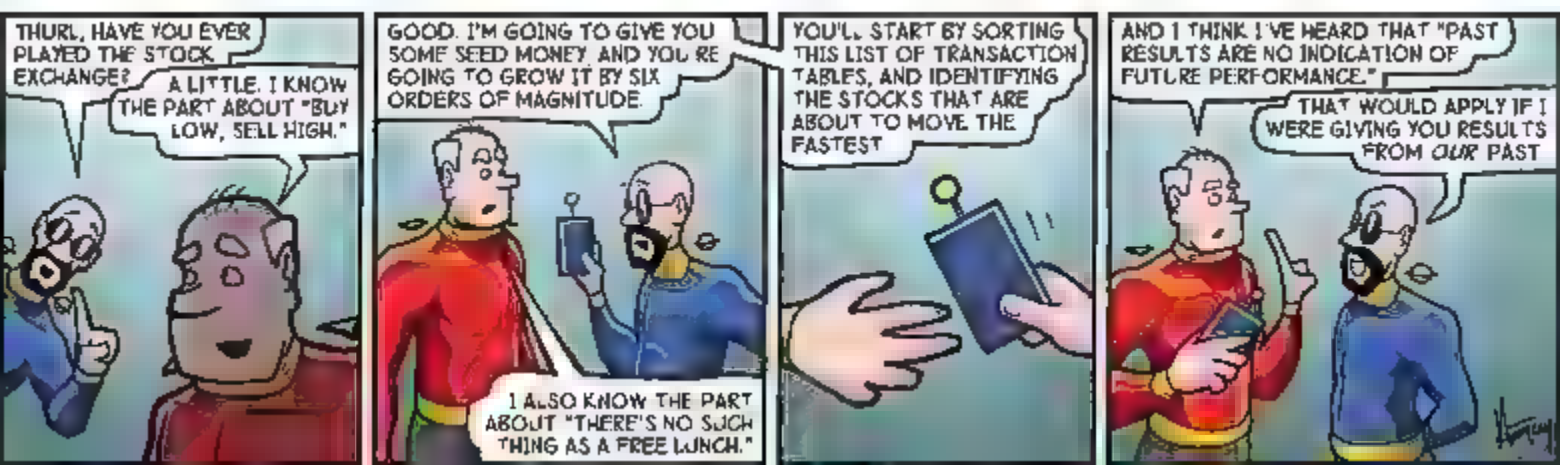

ENNESBY, IT'S TIME FOR AN EMERGENCY STRATEGY MEETING.
I'm not coming
Kevyn brought me my memories of the next seven weeks. I know just what he's trying to save us from.
Kevyn and Petey are going to need every ship, every weapon, every A.I they can scrounge That includes me
Besides, I've looked at the tec report You can't save Tagon with one warship my size. You might as well start figuring out how to save him with no warships at all.
WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER, YOU AND I ARE GOING TO HAVE WORDS. LONG WORDS, WITH LOTS OF POINTY-SOUNDING EPITHETS.

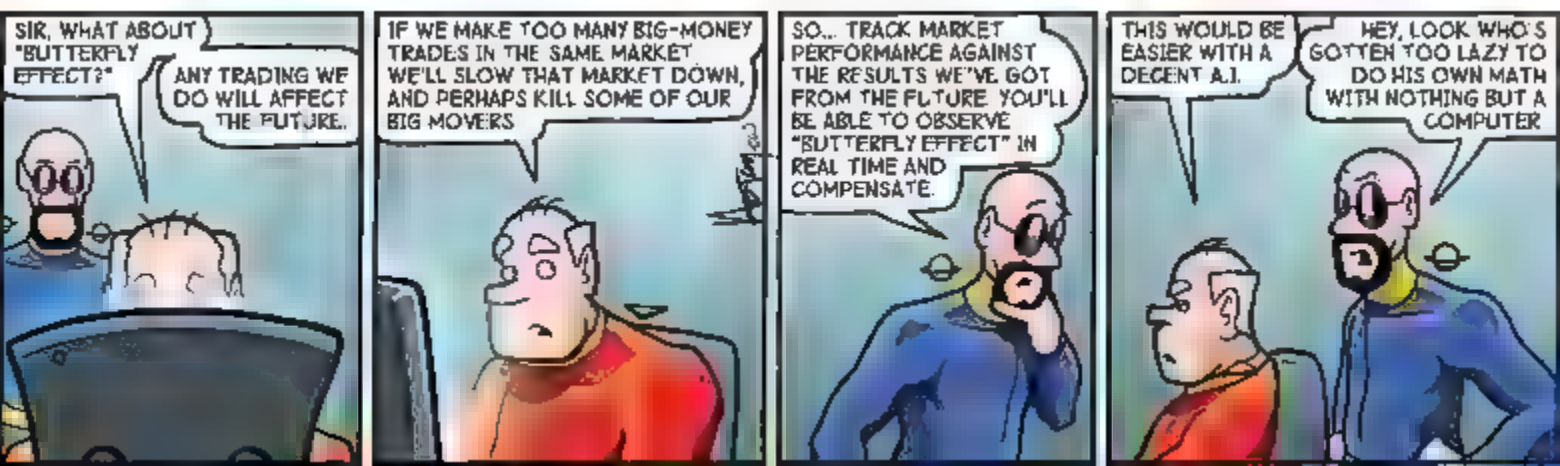
WELCOME BACK TO MAHUITALOTU READERS THE TOUGHS OF COURSE ARE HERE FOR THE FIRST TIME
MY LITTLE ROBOT IS OFF TO HELP SAVE THE GALAXY . COULD CRY
Schlock Mercenary
YOU SOFTY, I DIDN'T THINK YOU HAD THAT IN YOU
WELL. HE'S GOT OUR SHIP THAT S NINETY-NINE PERCENT OF OUR FIREPOWER CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE FOR THE RESCUE MISSION I'M SUPPOSED TO PLAN.
THE TACTICAL SITUATION IS HORRIBLE ACCORDING TO THIS REPORT, TAGON WILL BE UP AGAINST A HALF DOZEN RETAINER TROOPS AND AS MANY AS TWENTY ELITE MERCENARIES.

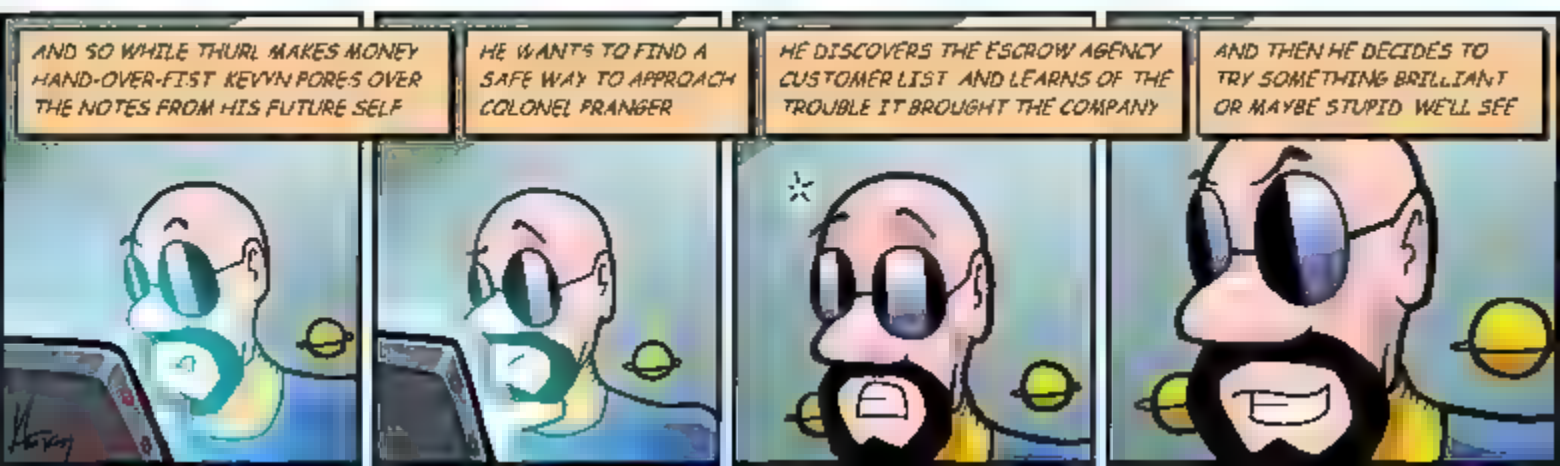

WORSE, THEY'RE ALL BURIED UNDER A KILOMETER OF ROCK AND GRAVITIC SHIELDING
OH, AND THREE INDEPENDENT ANTI-TERAPORT SYSTEMS ARE GOING TO GET CRANKED UP TO THE POINT THAT HIS ONLY WAY IN OR OUT IS COMPROMISED
THE TERAPORT IS YOUR BRAIN-CHILD, COMMANDER. CAN'T YOU COBBLE TOGETHER SOMETHING SCIENTIFIC?
YOU MEAN A "PLOT DEVICE?" NO.
DON'T THINK I HAVEN'T CONSIDERED IT. THOUGH. I'VE BEEN RACKING MY BRAINS TRYING TO COME UP WITH SOME WAY TO REACH INTO THAT FORTRESS UNDETECTED SO WE COULD EVEN UP THE ODDS.

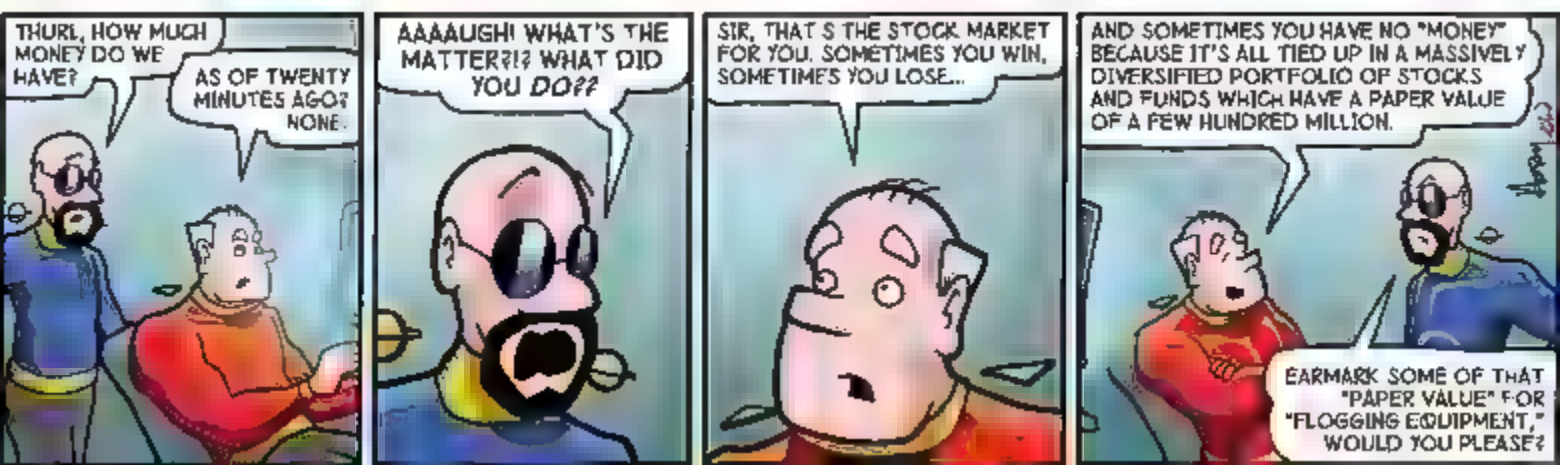
TWENTY ELITE MERCENARIES YOU SAID?
THEY'RE FROM "PRANGER'S BANGERS" COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER IS THERE HIMSELF, ALONG WITH HIS PERSONAL HONOR GUARD TO CLOSE A VERY RICH DEAL WITH OUR CAPTAIN'S TARGET
BUT THEY'RE MERCENARIES. RIGHT?
NOT JUST ANY MERCENARIES... THE BEST IN THE GALAXY
SO... WHY DON'T WE HIRE THEM FIRST?
I OH. OHHH...

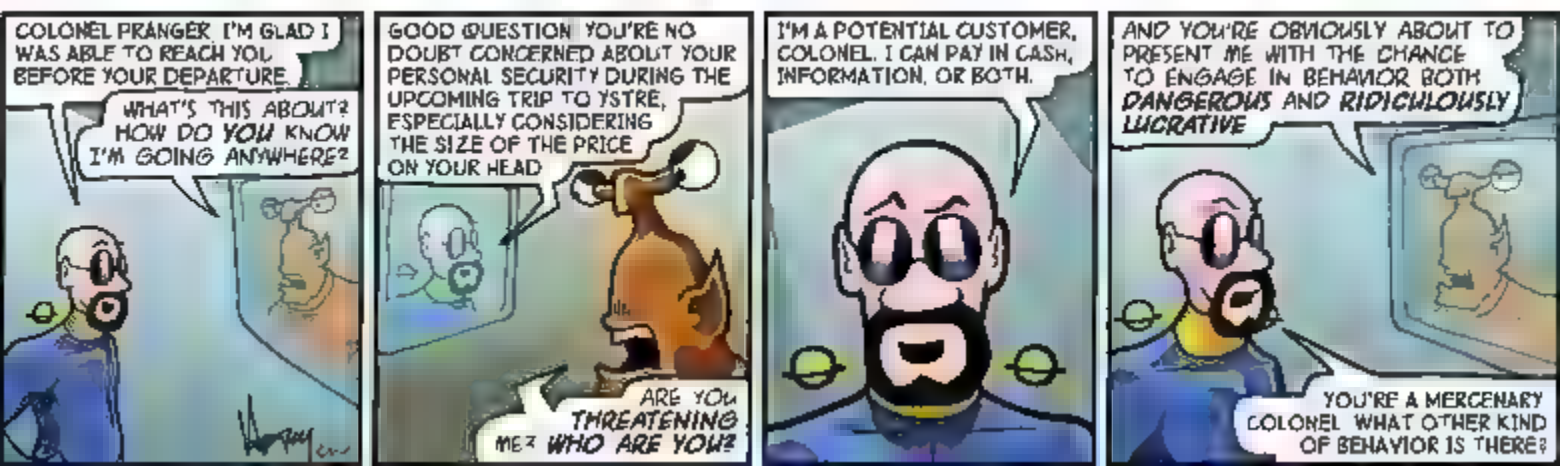

WE'LL NEED MONEY. LOTS OF IT.
DID YOUR FUTURE SELF GIVE YOU ANY STOCK MARKET RESULTS?
HEY, HE JUST MIGHT HAVE... HANG ON A MOMENT
HAHI JACKPOT!
IT'S MIXED IN WITH THE NEWS FEEDS, BUT WE'VE GOT IT. WE CAN DAY TRADE ON THIS AND MAKE A KILLING.
I TRUST IT'LL BE CLEANER THAN THE KILLING WE USUALLY DO?
WE MIGHT SEE SOME HUNDRED-STORY HALF-GAINERS FROM THE BROKERS, BUT THEY'RE NOT GOING TO LAND IN YOUR MED-BAY

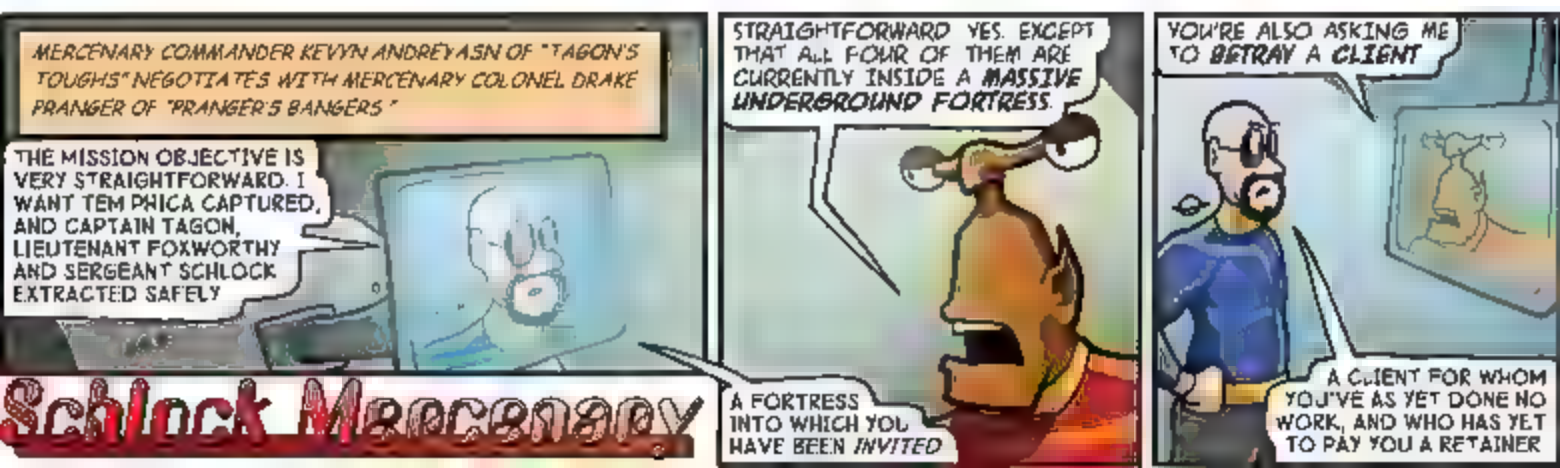

THURL, HAVE YOU EVER PLAYED THE STOCK EXCHANGE?
A LITTLE. I KNOW THE PART ABOUT "BUY LOW, SELL HIGH."
GOOD. I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU SOME SEED MONEY, AND YOU'RE GOING TO GROW IT BY SIX ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE.
I ALSO KNOW THE PART ABOUT "THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH."
YOU'LL START BY SORTING THIS LIST OF TRANSACTION TABLES, AND IDENTIFYING THE STOCKS THAT ARE ABOUT TO MOVE THE FASTEST
AND I THINK I'VE HEARD THAT "PAST RESULTS ARE NO INDICATION OF FUTURE PERFORMANCE."
THAT WOULD APPLY IF I WERE GIVING YOU RESULTS FROM *OUR* PAST

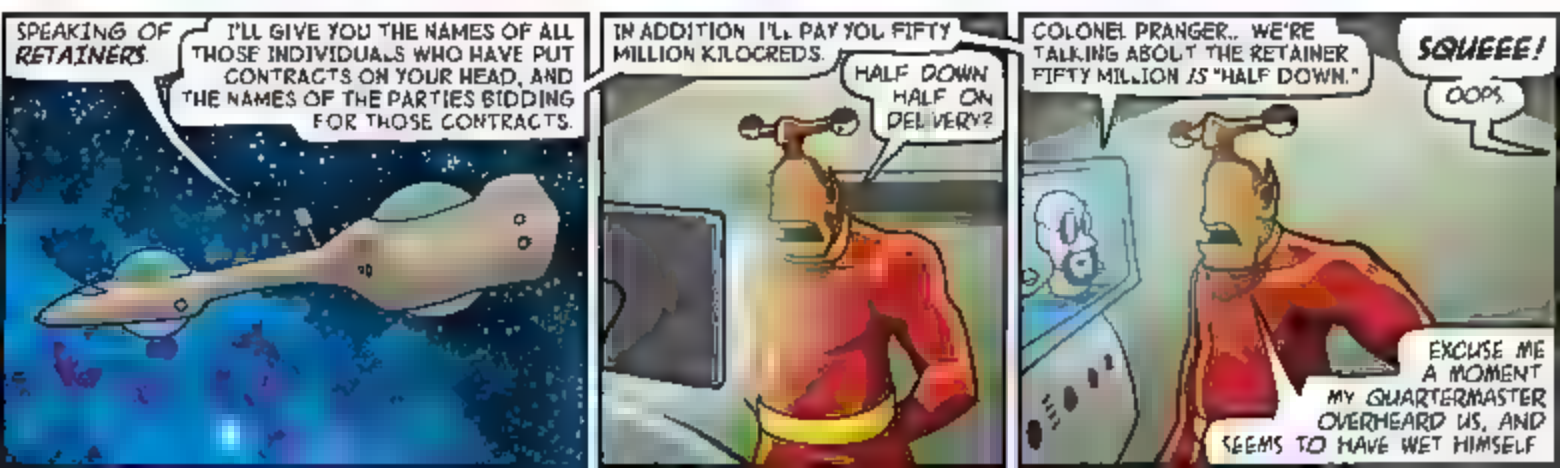

SIR, WHAT ABOUT "BUTTERFLY EFFECT?"
ANY TRADING WE DO WILL AFFECT THE FUTURE.
IF WE MAKE TOO MANY BIG-MONEY TRADES IN THE SAME MARKET WE'LL SLOW THAT MARKET DOWN, AND PERHAPS KILL SOME OF OUR BIG MOVERS
SO... TRACK MARKET PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE RESULTS WE'VE GOT FROM THE FUTURE. YOU'LL BE ABLE TO OBSERVE "BUTTERFLY EFFECT" IN REAL TIME AND COMPENSATE.
THIS WOULD BE EASIER WITH A DECENT A.I.
HEY, LOOK WHO'S GOTTEN TOO LAZY TO DO HIS OWN MATH WITH NOTHING BUT A COMPUTER

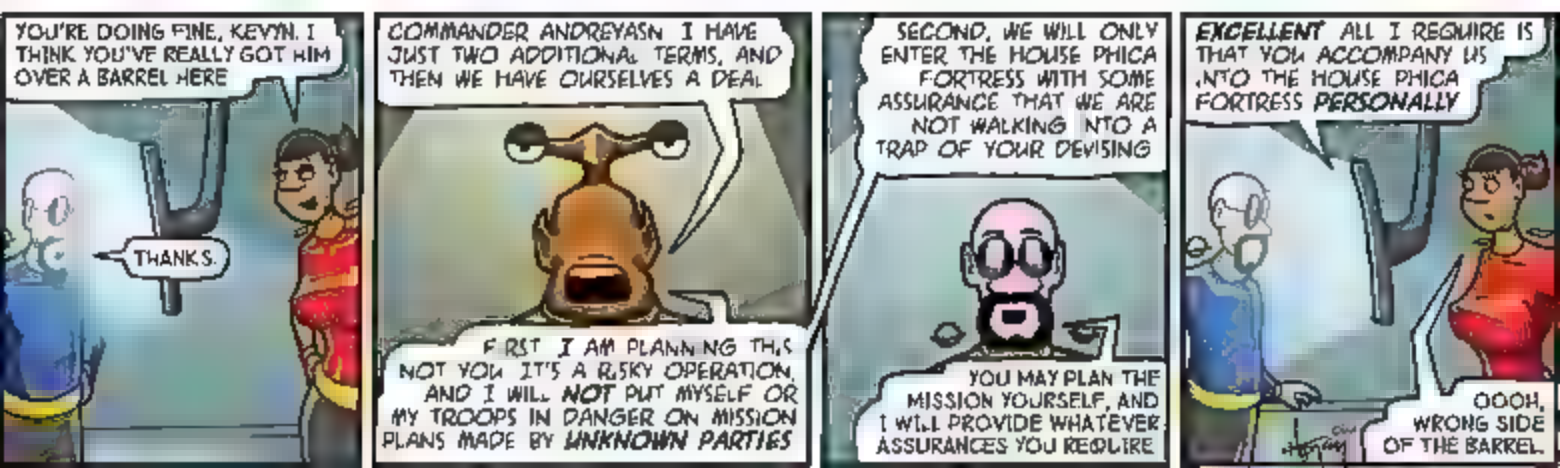

AND SO WHILE THURL MAKES MONEY HAND-OVER-FIST KEVYN PORES OVER THE NOTES FROM HIS FUTURE SELF
HE WANTS TO FIND A SAFE WAY TO APPROACH COLONEL FRANGER
HE DISCOVERS THE ESCROW AGENCY CUSTOMER LIST AND LEARNS OF THE TROUBLE IT BROUGHT THE COMPANY
AND THEN HE DECIDES TO TRY SOMETHING BRILLIANT OR MAYBE STUPID WE'LL SEE


THURL, HOW MUCH MONEY DO WE HAVE?
AS OF TWENTY MINUTES AGO? NONE.
AAAAUGH! WHAT'S THE MATTER?!? WHAT DID YOU DO??
SIR, THAT'S THE STOCK MARKET FOR YOU. SOMETIMES YOU WIN, SOMETIMES YOU LOSE...
AND SOMETIMES YOU HAVE NO "MONEY" BECAUSE IT'S ALL TIED UP IN A MASSIVELY DIVERSIFIED PORTFOLIO OF STOCKS AND FUNDS WHICH HAVE A PAPER VALUE OF A FEW HUNDRED MILLION.
EARMARK SOME OF THAT "PAPER VALUE" FOR "FLOGGING EQUIPMENT," WOULD YOU PLEASE?

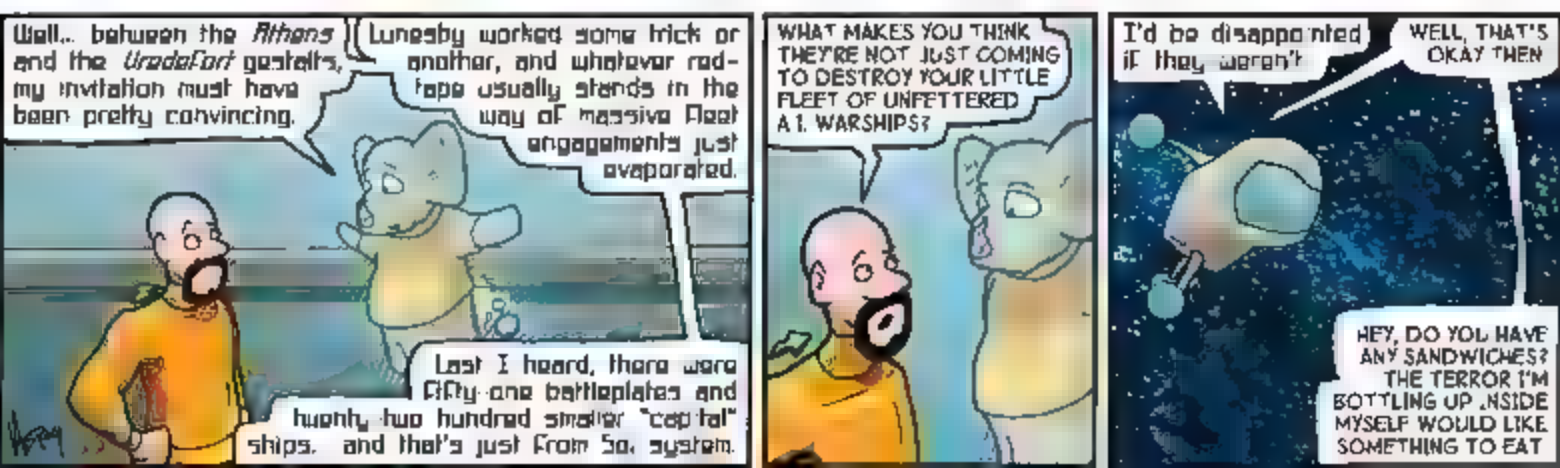

COLONEL PRANGER, I'M GLAD I WAS ABLE TO REACH YOU BEFORE YOUR DEPARTURE.
WHAT'S THIS ABOUT? HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M GOING ANYWHERE?
GOOD QUESTION. YOU'RE NO DOUBT CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL SECURITY DURING THE UPCOMING TRIP TO YSTRE, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THE SIZE OF THE PRICE ON YOUR HEAD.
ARE YOU THREATENING ME? WHO ARE YOU?
I'M A POTENTIAL CUSTOMER, COLONEL. I CAN PAY IN CASH, INFORMATION, OR BOTH.
AND YOU'RE OBVIOUSLY ABOUT TO PRESENT ME WITH THE CHANCE TO ENGAGE IN BEHAVIOR BOTH DANGEROUS AND RIDICULOUSLY LUCRATIVE.
YOU'RE A MERCENARY COLONEL. WHAT OTHER KIND OF BEHAVIOR IS THERE?

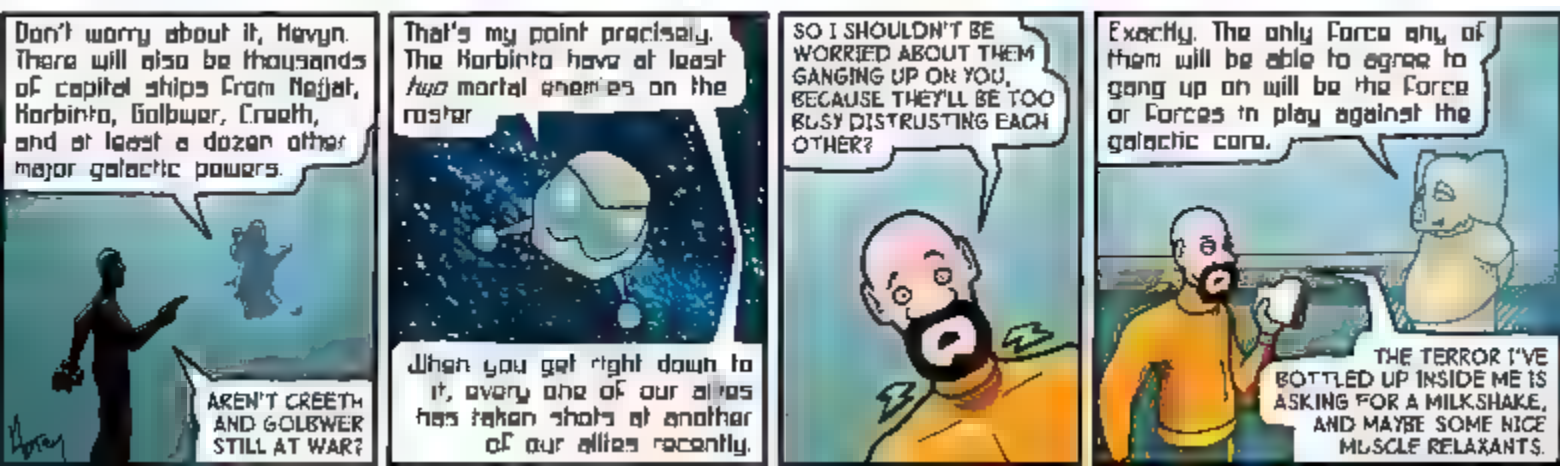

MERCENARY COMMANDER KEVYN ANDREYASN OF "TAGON'S TOUGHS" NEGOTIATES WITH MERCENARY COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER OF "PRANGER'S BANGERS"
THE MISSION OBJECTIVE IS VERY STRAIGHTFORWARD. I WANT TEM PHICA CAPTURED, AND CAPTAIN TAGON, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY AND SERGEANT SCHLOCK EXTRACTED SAFELY
Schlock Mercenary
STRAIGHTFORWARD YES. EXCEPT THAT ALL FOUR OF THEM ARE CURRENTLY INSIDE A MASSIVE UNDERGROUND FORTRESS.
A FORTRESS INTO WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN INVITED
YOU'RE ALSO ASKING ME TO BETRAY A CLIENT
A CLIENT FOR WHOM YOU'VE AS YET DONE NO WORK, AND WHO HAS YET TO PAY YOU A RETAINER

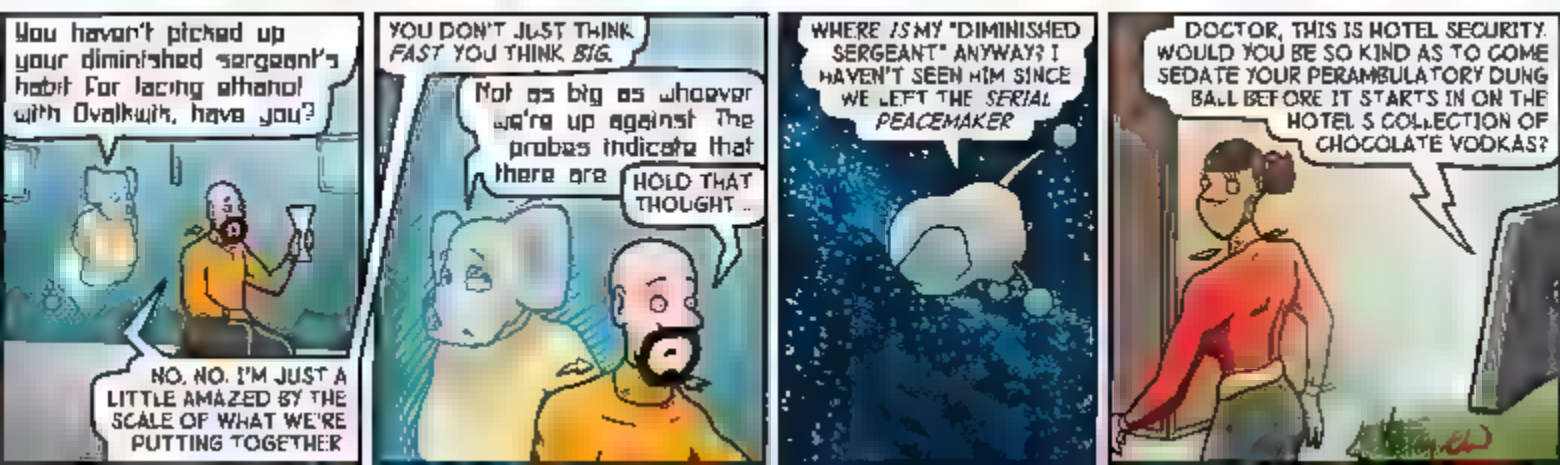

SPEAKING OF RETAINERS.
I'LL GIVE YOU THE NAMES OF ALL THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE PUT CONTRACTS ON YOUR HEAD, AND THE NAMES OF THE PARTIES BIDDING FOR THOSE CONTRACTS.
IN ADDITION I'LL PAY YOU FIFTY MILLION KILOCREDS.
HALF DOWN HALF ON DELIVERY?
COLONEL PRANGER.. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THE RETAINER FIFTY MILLION IS "HALF DOWN."
SQUEEE!
OOPS.
EXCUSE ME A MOMENT MY QUARTERMASTER OVERHEARD US, AND SEEMS TO HAVE WET HIMSELF

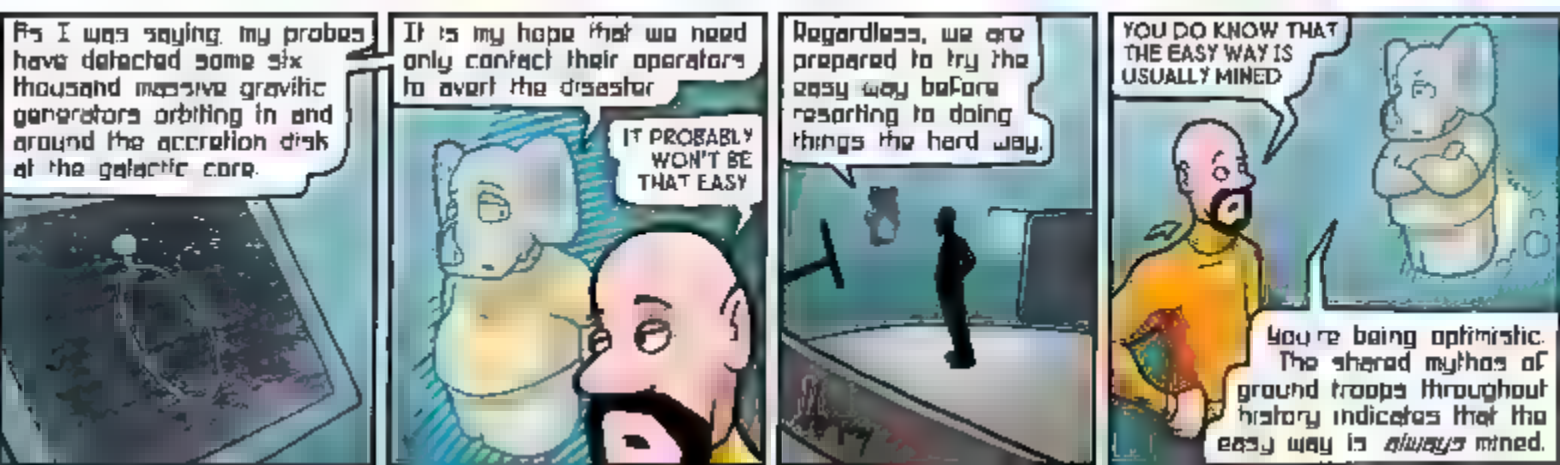

YOU'RE DOING FINE, KEVYN. I THINK YOU'VE REALLY GOT HIM OVER A BARREL HERE
THANKS.
COMMANDER ANDREYASN I HAVE JUST TWO ADDITIONAL TERMS, AND THEN WE HAVE OURSELVES A DEAL
FIRST I AM PLANNING THIS NOT YOU IT'S A RISKY OPERATION, AND I WILL NOT PUT MYSELF OR MY TROOPS IN DANGER ON MISSION PLANS MADE BY UNKNOWN PARTIES
SECOND, WE WILL ONLY ENTER THE HOUSE PHICA FORTRESS WITH SOME ASSURANCE THAT WE ARE NOT WALKING INTO A TRAP OF YOUR DEVISING
YOU MAY PLAN THE MISSION YOURSELF, AND I WILL PROVIDE WHATEVER ASSURANCES YOU REQUIRE
EXCELLENT ALL I REQUIRE IS THAT YOU ACCOMPANY US INTO THE HOUSE PHICA FORTRESS PERSONALLY
OOOH, WRONG SIDE OF THE BARREL

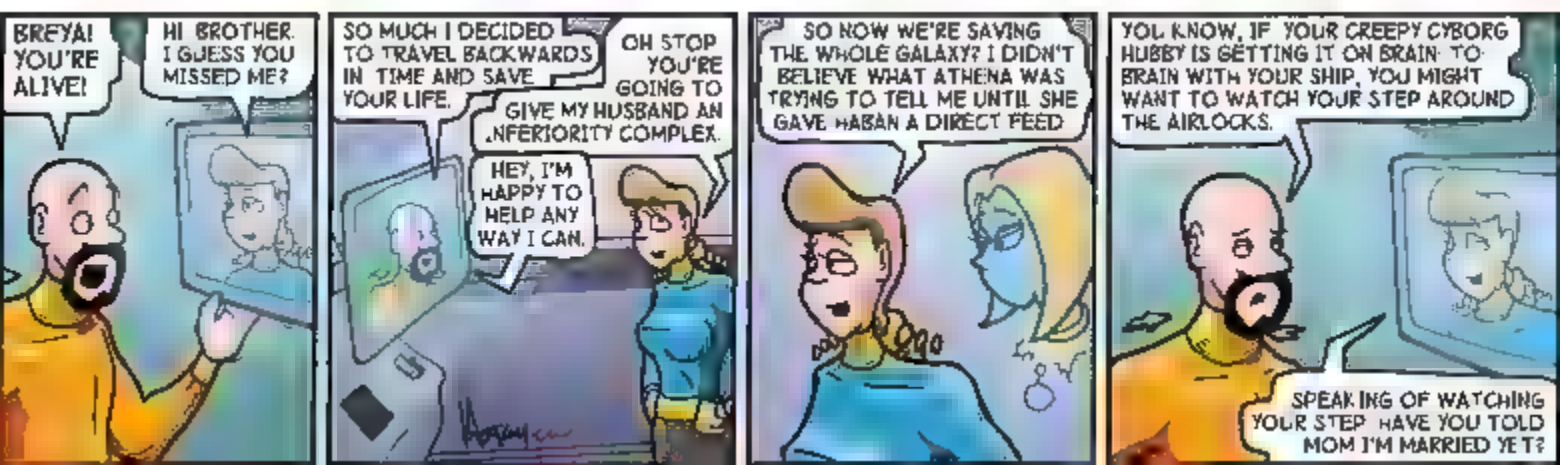
MEANWHILE EN ROUTE TO THE GALACTIC CORE
Those gestalts did the trick. We'll be meeting everyone at a rendezvous point two kilowights from the core.
WHO ELSE IS COMING?
I just *said* "everyone." What part of that didn't you understand?


Well... between the *Athens* and the *UrodaFort* gestalts, my invitation must have been pretty convincing.
Lunesby worked some trick or another, and whatever red-tape usually stands in the way of massive fleet engagements just evaporated.
Last I heard, there were fifty-one battleplates and twenty-two hundred smaller "capital" ships. and that's just from Sol system.
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THEY'RE NOT JUST COMING TO DESTROY YOUR LITTLE FLEET OF UNFETTERED A.I. WARSHIPS?
I'd be disappointed if they weren't
WELL, THAT'S OKAY THEN
HEY, DO YOU HAVE ANY SANDWICHES? THE TERROR I'M BOTTLING UP INSIDE MYSELF WOULD LIKE SOMETHING TO EAT


Don't worry about it, Hevyn. There will also be thousands of capital ships from Nagat, Korbinto, Golbwer, Creeth, and at least a dozen other major galactic powers.
AREN'T CREETH AND GOLBWER STILL AT WAR?
That's my point precisely. The Korbinto have at least *two* mortal enemies on the roster.
When you get right down to it, every one of our allies has taken shots at another of our allies recently.
SO I SHOULDN'T BE WORRIED ABOUT THEM GANGING UP ON YOU, BECAUSE THEY'LL BE TOO BUSY DISTRUSTING EACH OTHER?
Exactly. The only Force any of them will be able to agree to gang up on will be the Force or Forces in play against the galactic core.
THE TERROR I'VE BOTTLED UP INSIDE ME IS ASKING FOR A MILKSHAKE, AND MAYBE SOME NICE MUSCLE RELAXANTS.

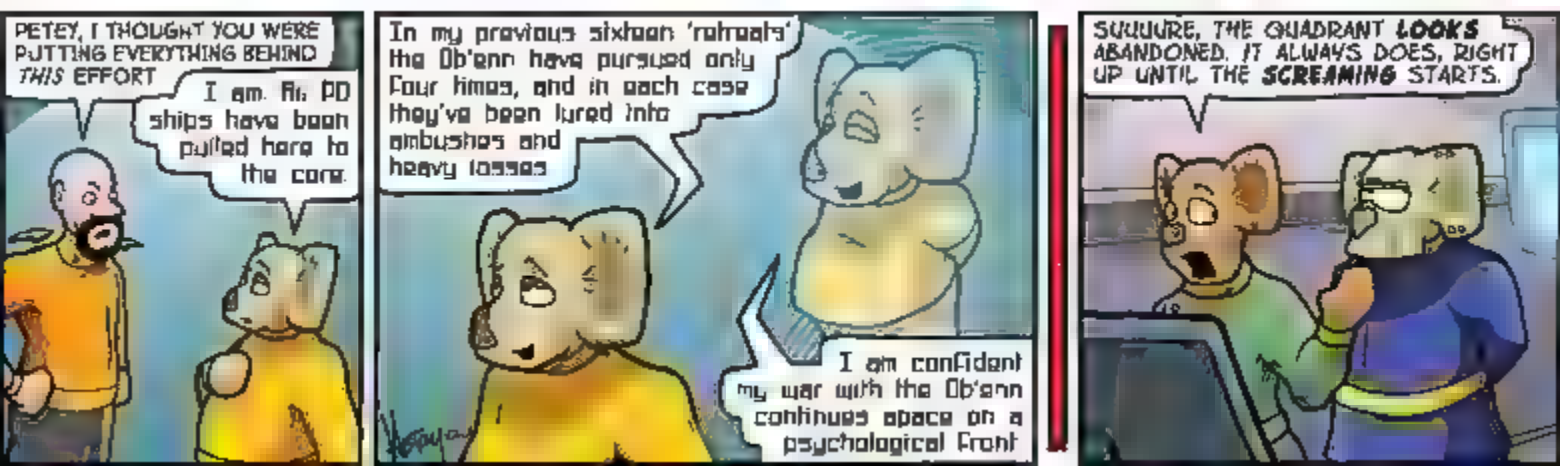

You haven't picked up your diminished sergeant's habit for lacing ethanol with Ovalkwik, have you?
NO, NO. I'M JUST A LITTLE AMAZED BY THE SCALE OF WHAT WE'RE PUTTING TOGETHER
YOU DON'T JUST THINK *FAST* YOU THINK *BIG*.
Not as big as whoever we're up against. The probes indicate that there are
HOLD THAT THOUGHT ...
WHERE *IS* MY "DIMINISHED SERGEANT" ANYWAY? I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM SINCE WE LEFT THE *SERIAL PEACEMAKER*
DOCTOR, THIS IS HOTEL SECURITY. WOULD YOU BE SO KIND AS TO COME SEDATE YOUR PERAMBULATORY DUNG BALL BEFORE IT STARTS IN ON THE HOTEL'S COLLECTION OF CHOCOLATE VODKAS?

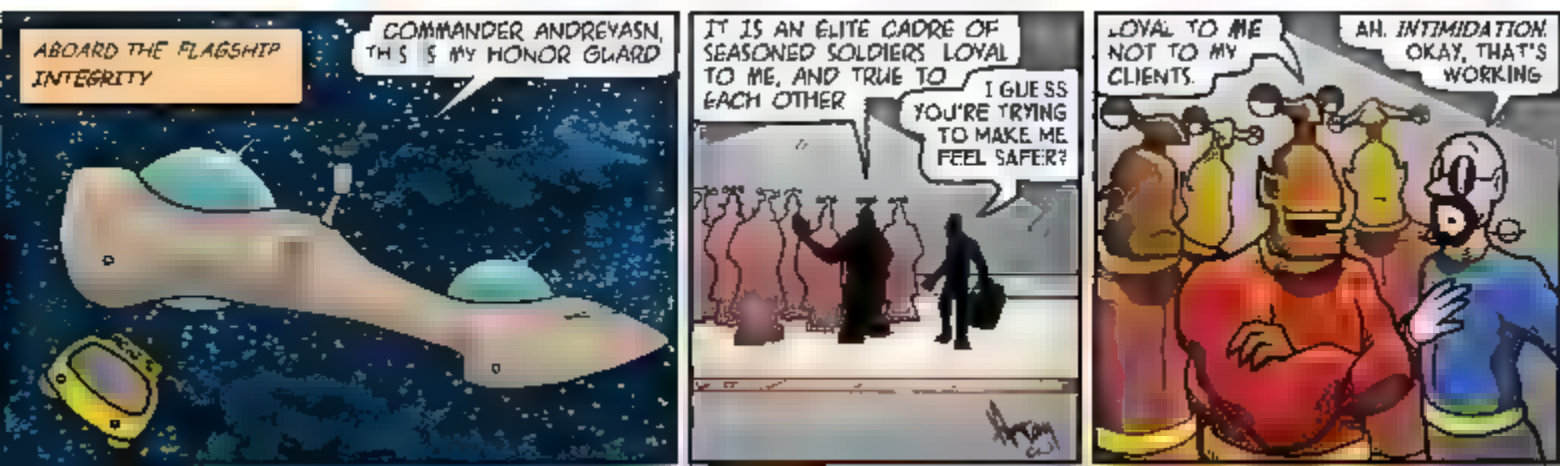

As I was saying, my probes have detected some six thousand massive gravitic generators orbiting in and around the accretion disk at the galactic core.
It is my hope that we need only contact their operators to avert the disaster.
IT PROBABLY WON'T BE THAT EASY
Regardless, we are prepared to try the easy way before resorting to doing things the hard way.
YOU DO KNOW THAT THE EASY WAY IS USUALLY MINED.
You're being optimistic. The shared mythos of ground troops throughout history indicates that the easy way is always mined.

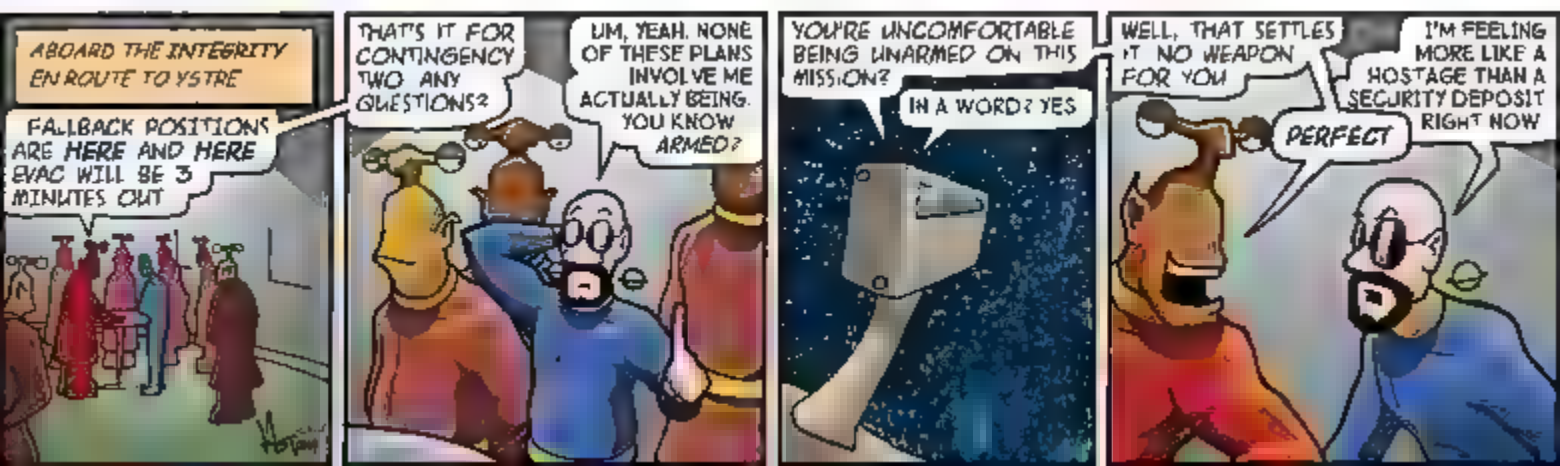

BREYA! YOU'RE ALIVE!
HI BROTHER. I GUESS YOU MISSED ME?
SO MUCH I DECIDED TO TRAVEL BACKWARDS IN TIME AND SAVE YOUR LIFE.
OH STOP YOU'RE GOING TO GIVE MY HUSBAND AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX.
HEY, I'M HAPPY TO HELP ANY WAY I CAN.
SO NOW WE'RE SAVING THE WHOLE GALAXY? I DIDN'T BELIEVE WHAT ATHENA WAS TRYING TO TELL ME UNTIL SHE GAVE HABAN A DIRECT FEED
YOU KNOW, IF YOUR CREEPY CYBORG HUBBY IS GETTING IT ON BRAIN TO BRAIN WITH YOUR SHIP, YOU MIGHT WANT TO WATCH YOUR STEP AROUND THE AIRLOCKS.
SPEAKING OF WATCHING YOUR STEP HAVE YOU TOLD MOM I'M MARRIED YET?

AN HISTORIC MEETING OF FLEET ADMIRALS IS NOW UNDER WAY ABOARD THE PARLIAMENTARY DIET
Welcome aboard, everyone. Thank you for putting your differences aside.
THE MANY SPECIES HERE REPRESENTED—GREETHLING, GOLBWERIAN, HUMAN, SPAANG, KORBINTON, METISI, UNTOC, PLELEAN, NAMAVAWG, AND MORE—ARE JUST A TINY SAMPLING OF GALACTIC RACES
You represent the greatest of the galactic powers, and you will all need to work together to preemptively undo that which will have been done.
THEY'RE ALL THAT COULD MAKE IT ON SUCH SHORT NOTICE

Schlock Mercenary
WE'VE HAD A LOOK AT THESE GENERATORS. TAUSENNIGAN OB'ENN PLATE-CLASS SHIPS ARE THE ONLY ONES WITH THE GRAVY TO MATCH THEM CLAW FOR CLAW
WHERE ARE THE OB'ENN? CERTAINLY THEY QUALIFY AS A GALACTIC POWER
They weren't invited for two reasons. First, their current cultural dogma calls for the eventual extermination of all non-Ob'enn. I doubt they'd "play well with others."
Second, I am presently engaging them in a little campaign of containment and re-education.

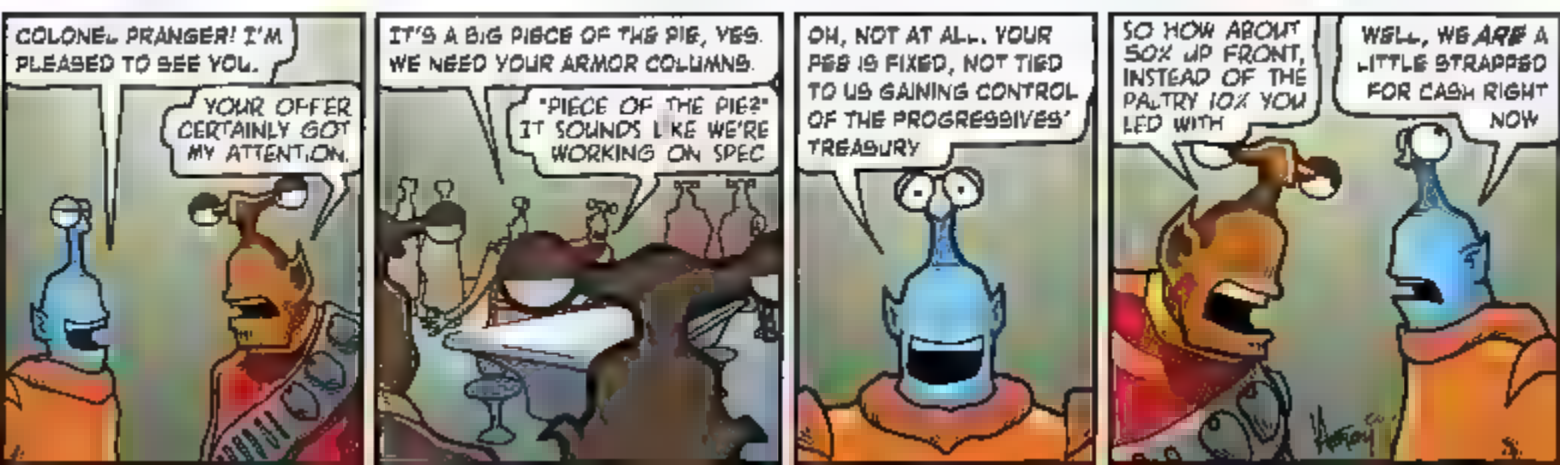

PETEY, I THOUGHT YOU WERE PUTTING EVERYTHING BEHIND *THIS* EFFORT
I am. All PD ships have been pulled here to the core.
In my previous sixteen 'retreats' the Ob'enn have pursued only four times, and in each case they've been lured into ambushes and heavy losses
I am confident my war with the Ob'enn continues apace on a psychological front
SUUUURE, THE QUADRANT **LOOKS** ABANDONED. IT ALWAYS DOES, RIGHT UP UNTIL THE **SCREAMING** STARTS.

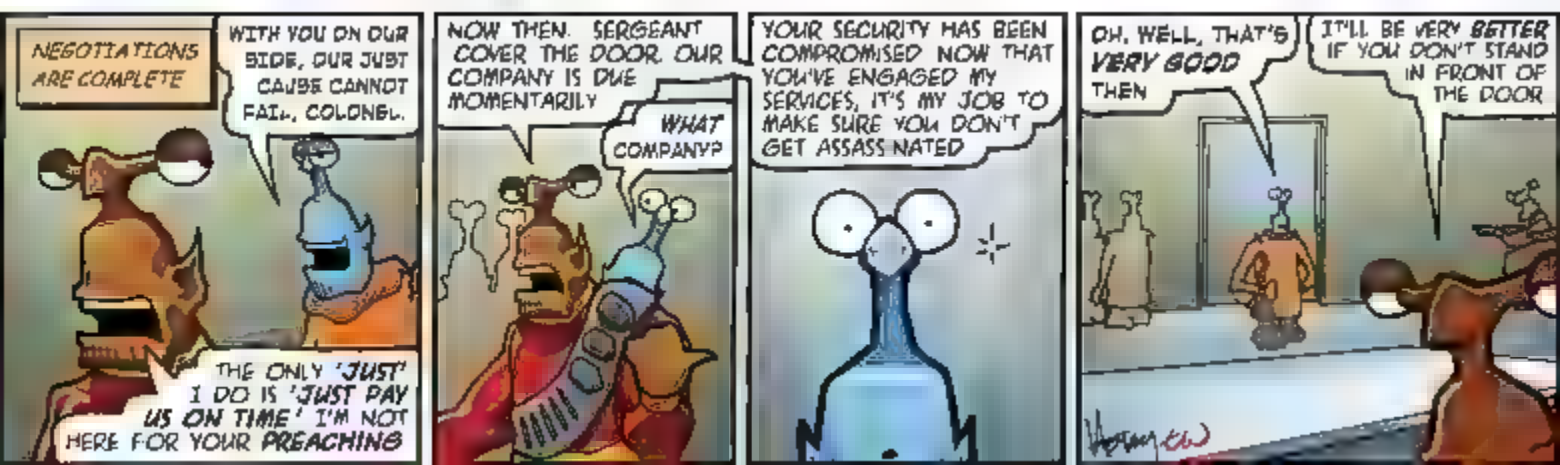

ABOARD THE FLAGSHIP INTEGRITY
COMMANDER ANDREYASN, THIS IS MY HONOR GUARD
IT IS AN ELITE CADRE OF SEASONED SOLDIERS LOYAL TO ME, AND TRUE TO EACH OTHER
I GUESS YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL SAFER?
LOYAL TO ME NOT TO MY CLIENTS.
AH. INTIMIDATION. OKAY, THAT'S WORKING


ABOARD THE INTEGRITY EN ROUTE TO YSTRE
FALLBACK POSITIONS ARE HERE AND HERE EVAC WILL BE 3 MINUTES OUT
THAT'S IT FOR CONTINGENCY TWO ANY QUESTIONS?
UM, YEAH. NONE OF THESE PLANS INVOLVE ME ACTUALLY BEING. YOU KNOW ARMED?
YOU'RE UNCOMFORTABLE BEING UNARMED ON THIS MISSION?
IN A WORD? YES
WELL, THAT SETTLES IT NO WEAPON FOR YOU
PERFECT
I'M FEELING MORE LIKE A HOSTAGE THAN A SECURITY DEPOSIT RIGHT NOW

WELCOME TO SANCTUARIAT, THE ANCESTRAL SEAT OF HOUSE PHICA. I WILL ESCORT YOU TO YOUR MEETING WITH TEM PHICA.
THANK YOU, CHAMBERLAIN.
YOUR HONOR GUARD IS FREE TO ACCOMPANY US, AS IS YOUR .. UMM...
..MONKEY?
INTELLIGENCE OFFICER. HE'S A HUMAN.
"NO. SON YOUR EARS LOOK FINE" MOM SAID

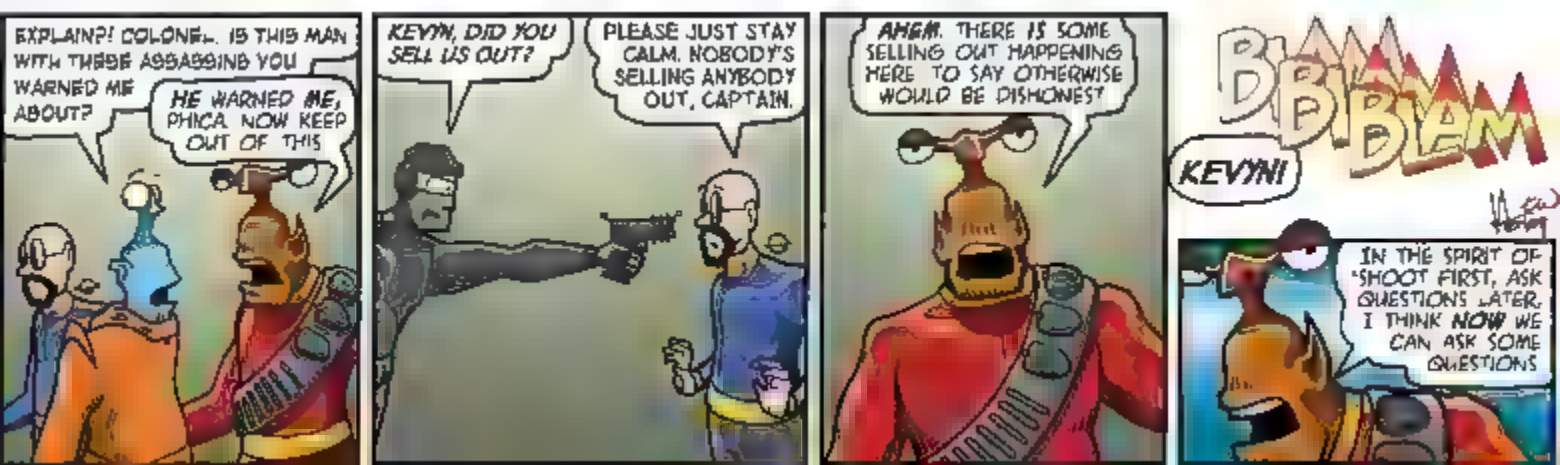
ELSEWHERE IN THE PHICA FORTRESS, A SCENE WE'VE SEEN BEFORE
THIS 'PHICA' GUY IS PARANOID EVEN AT HOME. HE'S SURROUNDED BY GUARDS.
ALL OF WHOM HAVE LITTLE TRAINING, LIGHT SHELL-ARMOR AND PROPELLANT WEAPONS.
OKAY SO HE'S SURROUNDED BY A MOVING LAYER OF ABLATIVE MEAT
Cut it out. You're makin' me hungry.
TEM PHICA IS ON HIS WAY
HOPEFULLY HISTORY WILL STOP REPEATING ITSELF BEFORE CHARLIE DANCES THE FOXTROT
RELAX, COMMANDER. I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THE WORST THING IS THAT COULD HAPPEN
SINCE YOU'RE THE ONE DOING THE HAPPENING IN THAT SCENARIO, I'M HAVING A HARD TIME RELAXING.

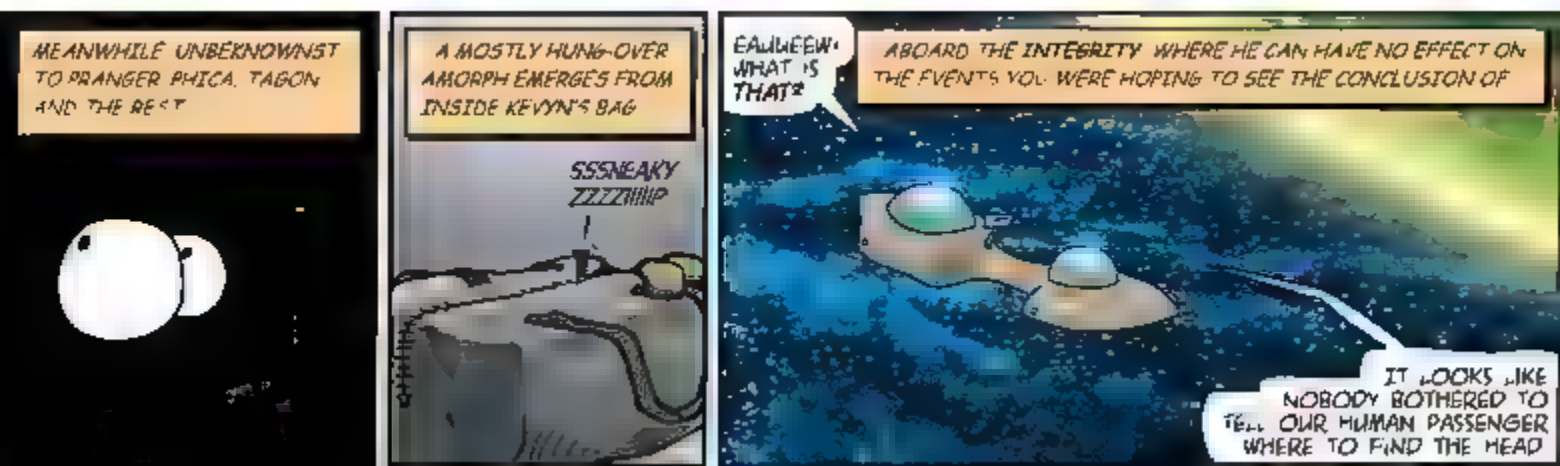

COLONEL PRANGER! I'M PLEASED TO SEE YOU.
YOUR OFFER CERTAINLY GOT MY ATTENTION.
IT'S A BIG PIECE OF THE PIE, YES. WE NEED YOUR ARMOR COLUMNS.
"PIECE OF THE PIE?" IT SOUNDS LIKE WE'RE WORKING ON SPEC
OH, NOT AT ALL. YOUR PEB IS FIXED, NOT TIED TO US GAINING CONTROL OF THE PROGRESSIVES' TREASURY
SO HOW ABOUT 50% UP FRONT, INSTEAD OF THE PALTRY 10% YOU LED WITH
WELL, WE ARE A LITTLE STRAPPED FOR CASH RIGHT NOW


NEGOTIATIONS ARE COMPLETE
WITH YOU ON OUR SIDE, OUR JUST CAUSE CANNOT FAIL, COLONEL.
THE ONLY 'JUST' I DO IS 'JUST PAY US ON TIME' I'M NOT HERE FOR YOUR PREACHING
NOW THEN. SERGEANT COVER THE DOOR. OUR COMPANY IS DUE MOMENTARILY
WHAT COMPANY?
YOUR SECURITY HAS BEEN COMPROMISED NOW THAT YOU'VE ENGAGED MY SERVICES, IT'S MY JOB TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GET ASSASSINATED
OH, WELL, THAT'S VERY GOOD THEN
IT'LL BE VERY BETTER IF YOU DON'T STAND IN FRONT OF THE DOOR

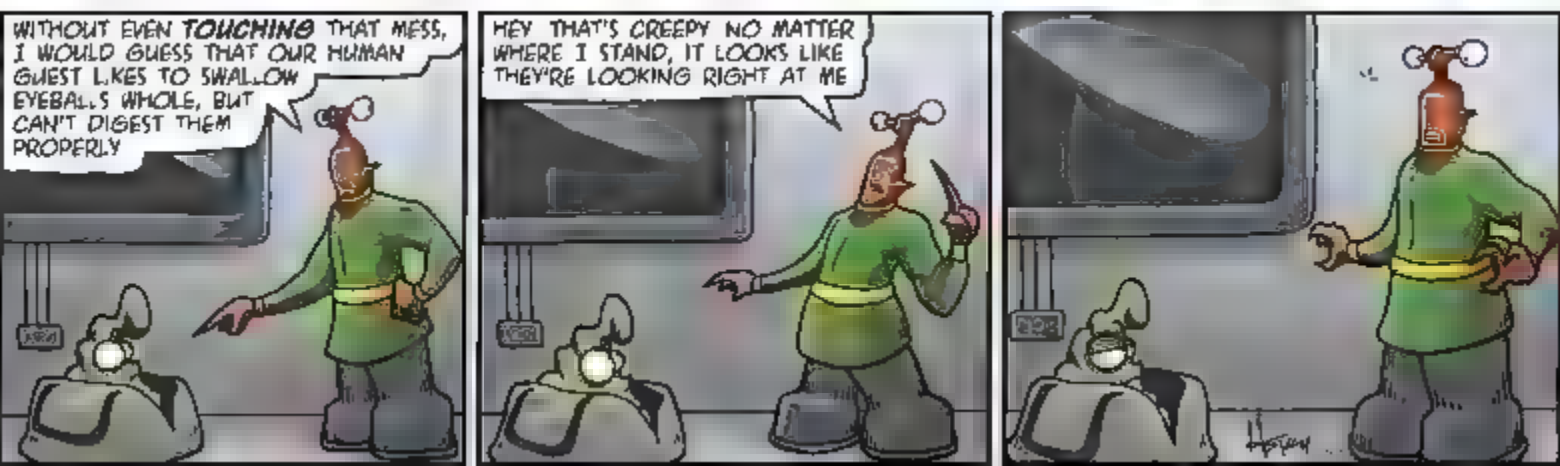
Schlock Mercenary

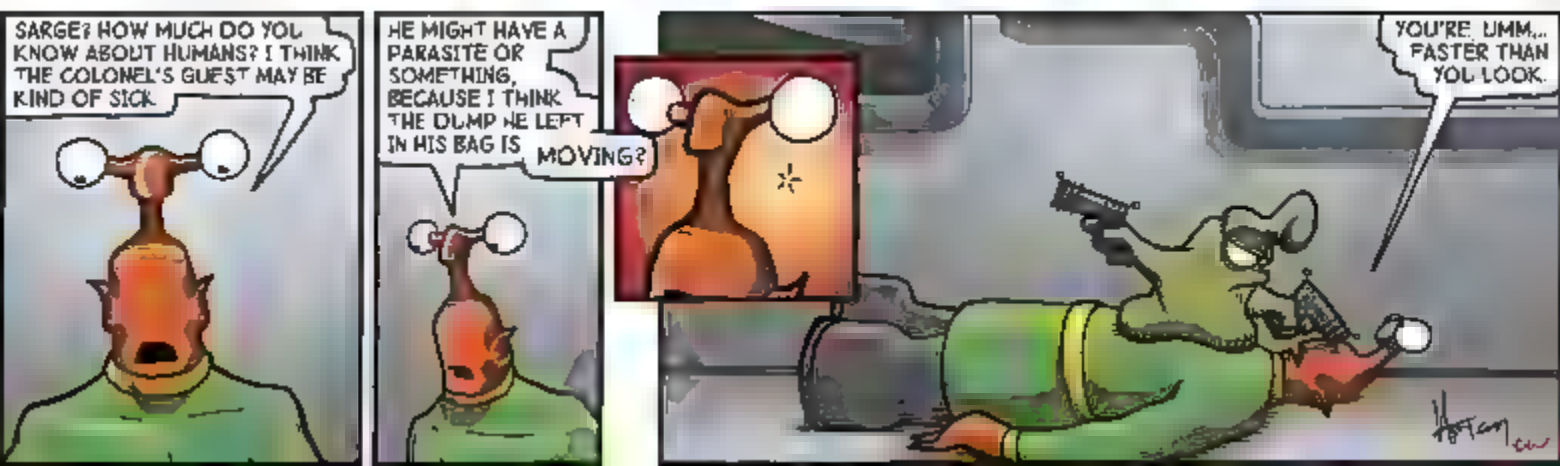
SIR, I THINK THEY WERE EXPECTING US
KEVYN?
DON'T SHOOT! I CAN EXPLAIN!


EXPLAIN?! COLONEL, IS THIS MAN WITH THESE ASSASSINS YOU WARNED ME ABOUT?
HE WARNED ME, PHICA. NOW KEEP OUT OF THIS
KEVYN, DID YOU SELL US OUT?
PLEASE JUST STAY CALM. NOBODY'S SELLING ANYBODY OUT, CAPTAIN.
AHEM. THERE IS SOME SELLING OUT HAPPENING HERE TO SAY OTHERWISE WOULD BE DISHONEST
BAM BAM BAM
KEVYN!
IN THE SPIRIT OF 'SHOOT FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS LATER, I THINK NOW WE CAN ASK SOME QUESTIONS

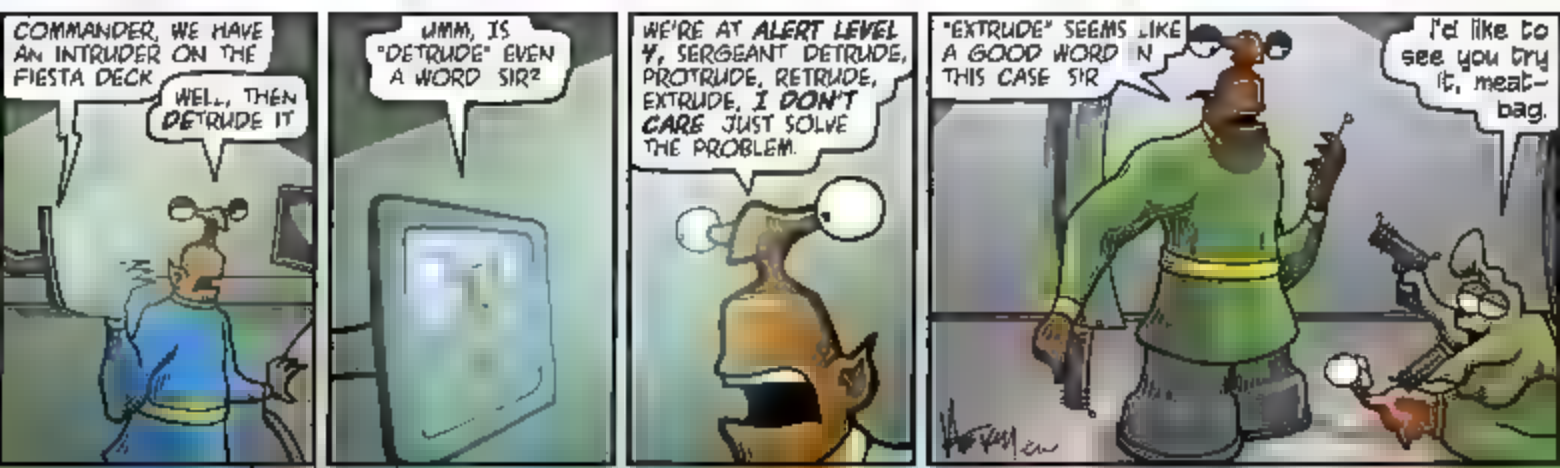

MEANWHILE UNBEKNOWNST TO RANGER PHICA, TAGON AND THE REST
A MOSTLY HUNG-OVER AMORPH EMERGES FROM INSIDE KEVYN'S BAG
SSSNEAKY ZZZZIIIIIP
EAUWEEW! WHAT IS THAT?
ABOARD THE INTEGRITY WHERE HE CAN HAVE NO EFFECT ON THE EVENTS YOU WERE HOPING TO SEE THE CONCLUSION OF
IT LOOKS LIKE NOBODY BOTHERED TO TELL OUR HUMAN PASSENGER WHERE TO FIND THE HEAD

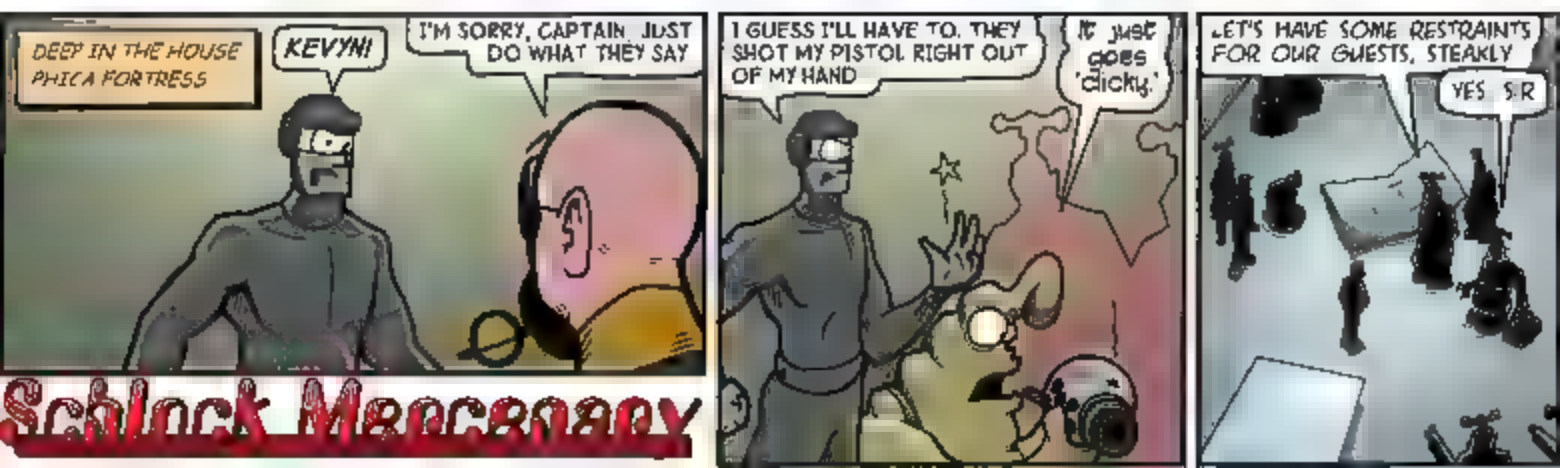
YOU KNOW, YOU CAN LEARN A LOT ABOUT AN ORGANISM BY EXAMINING ITS STOOL
OKAY, SARGE. WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE PILE THE HUMAN COMMANDER LEFT IN HIS BAG?
I THINK YOU MAY HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD ME CORPORAL
YOU CAN LEARN A LOT BY EXAMINING THE STOOL
HEY I OPTED OUT OF THE CONTINUING EDUCATION VOUCHER THIS YEAR

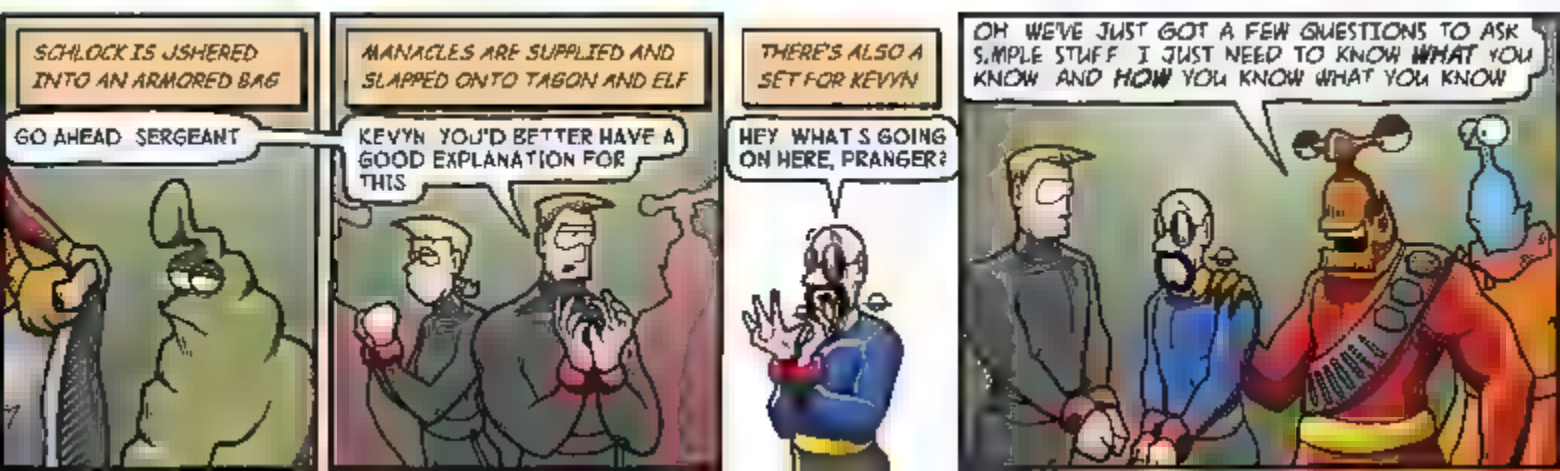

WITHOUT EVEN TOUCHING THAT MESS, I WOULD GUESS THAT OUR HUMAN GUEST LIKES TO SWALLOW EYEBALLS WHOLE, BUT CAN'T DIGEST THEM PROPERLY
HEY THAT'S CREEPY NO MATTER WHERE I STAND, IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE LOOKING RIGHT AT ME

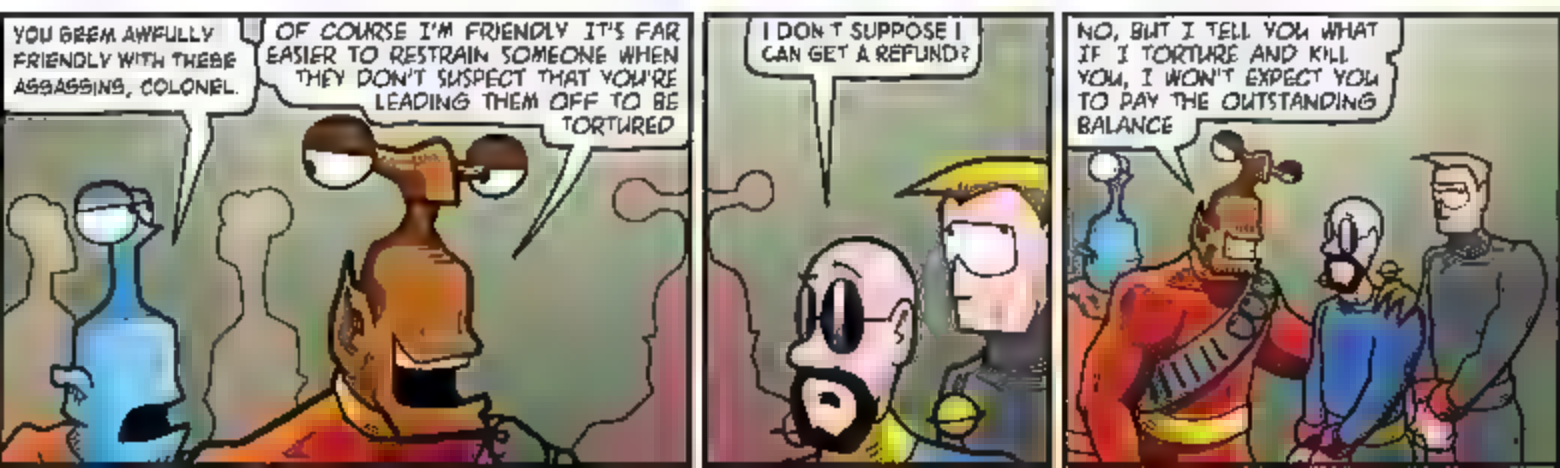

SARGE? HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT HUMANS? I THINK THE COLONEL'S GUEST MAY BE KIND OF SICK.
HE MIGHT HAVE A PARASITE OR SOMETHING, BECAUSE I THINK THE DUMP HE LEFT IN HIS BAG IS
MOVING?
YOU'RE UMM... FASTER THAN YOU LOOK.

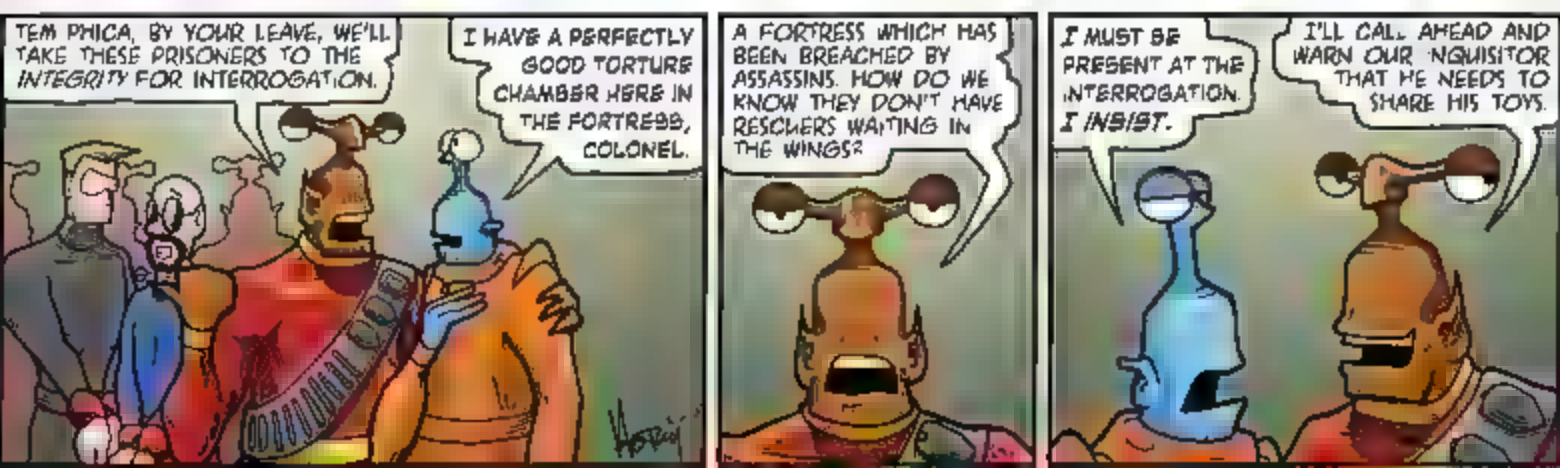
Quit talking about me like I'm poop. Where is Kevyn?
I may be little, but I know how to move this trigger thingy just fine.
CORPORAL. I THINK WE CAN SAFELY SAY THAT WHAT YOU FOUND IS NOT AN INTESTINAL PARASITE.
I'm not a lot of things. 'Not about to pull the trigger' isn't on the list.

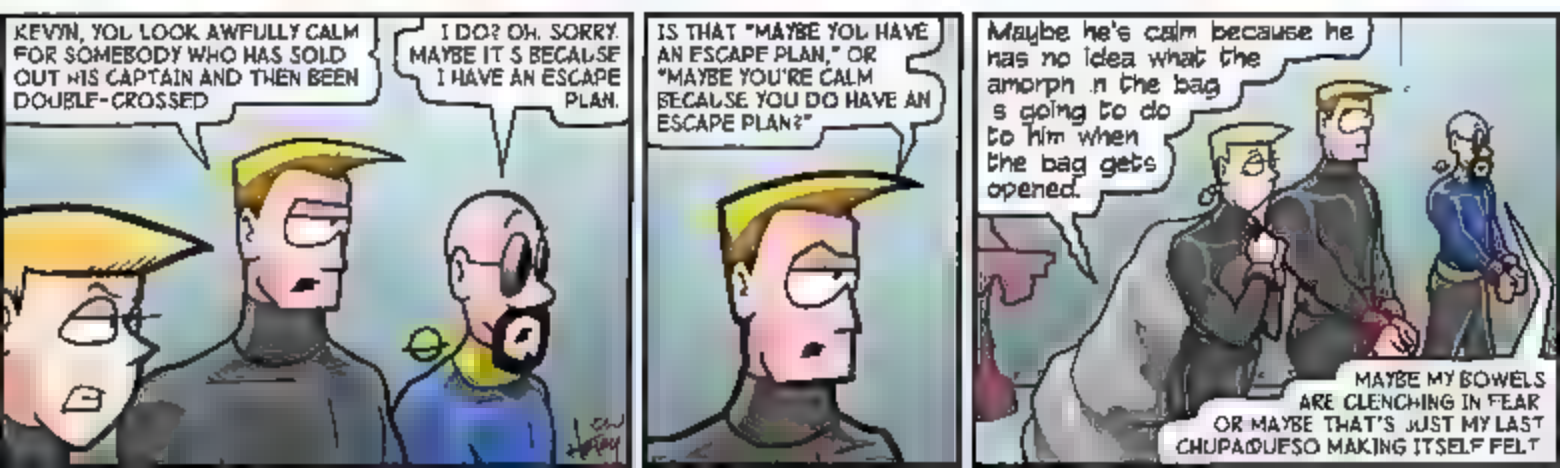

COMMANDER, WE HAVE AN INTRUDER ON THE FIESTA DECK
WELL, THEN DETRUDE IT
UMM, IS "DETRUDE" EVEN A WORD SIR?
WE'RE AT ALERT LEVEL Y, SERGEANT DETRUDE, PROTRUDE, RETRUDE, EXTRUDE, I DON'T CARE JUST SOLVE THE PROBLEM.
"EXTRUDE" SEEMS LIKE A GOOD WORD IN THIS CASE SIR
I'd like to see you try it, meat-bag.

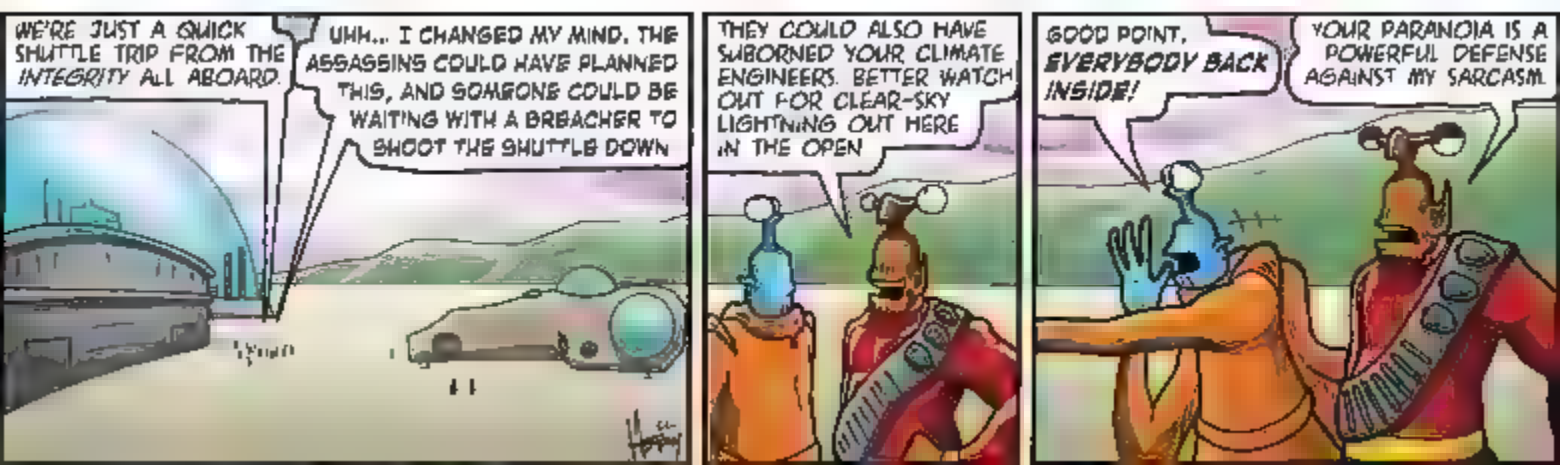

DEEP IN THE HOUSE PHICA FORTRESS
KEVYN!
I'M SORRY, CAPTAIN. JUST DO WHAT THEY SAY
Schlock Mercenary
I GUESS I'LL HAVE TO. THEY SHOT MY PISTOL RIGHT OUT OF MY HAND
It just goes 'clicky.'
LET'S HAVE SOME RESTRAINTS FOR OUR GUESTS, STEAKLY
YES SIR

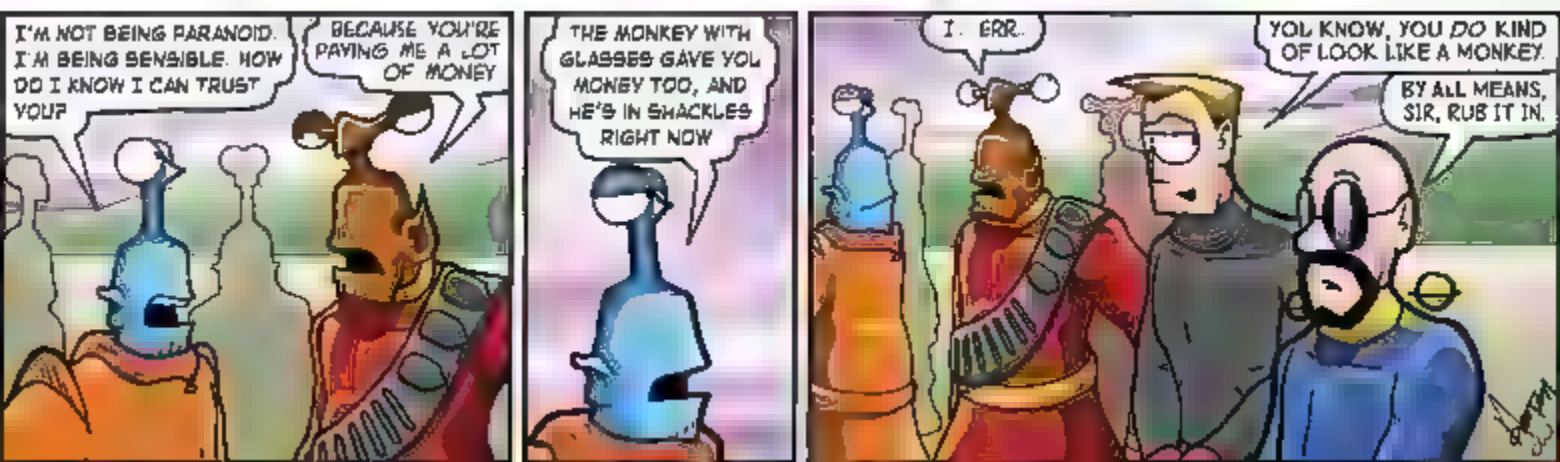

SCHLOCK IS USHERED INTO AN ARMORED BAG
GO AHEAD SERGEANT
MANACLES ARE SUPPLIED AND SLAPPED ONTO TAGON AND ELF
KEVYN YOU'D BETTER HAVE A GOOD EXPLANATION FOR THIS
THERE'S ALSO A SET FOR KEVYN
HEY WHAT'S GOING ON HERE, PRANGER?
OH WE'VE JUST GOT A FEW QUESTIONS TO ASK SIMPLE STUFF I JUST NEED TO KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW AND HOW YOU KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW

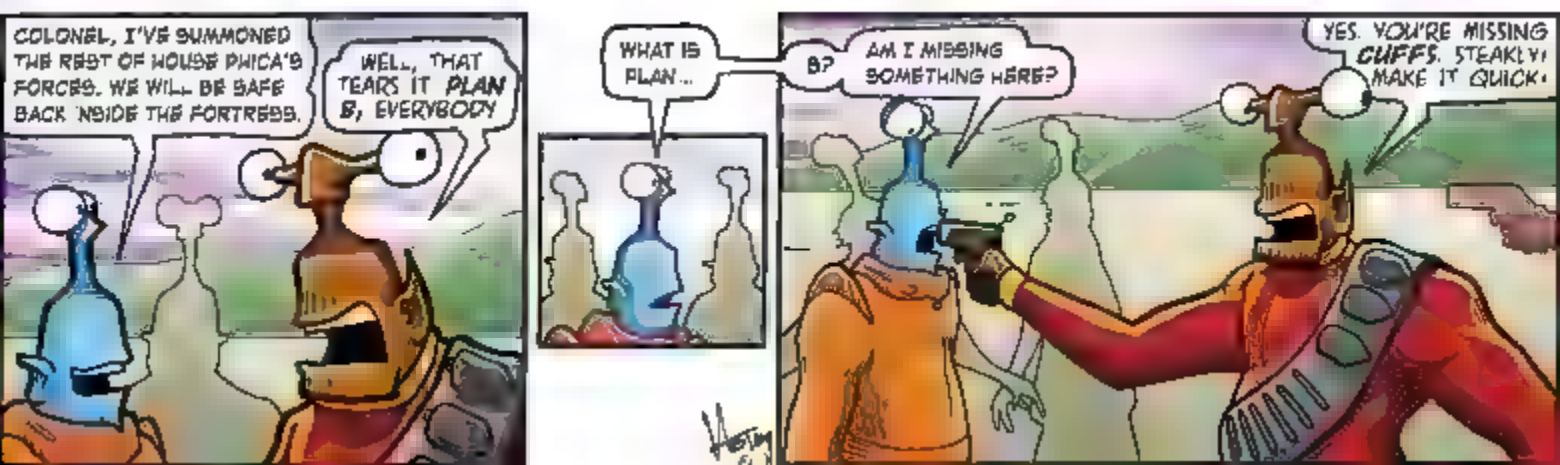

YOU SEEM AWFULLY FRIENDLY WITH THESE ASSASSINS, COLONEL.
OF COURSE I'M FRIENDLY IT'S FAR EASIER TO RESTRAIN SOMEONE WHEN THEY DON'T SUSPECT THAT YOU'RE LEADING THEM OFF TO BE TORTURED
I DON'T SUPPOSE I CAN GET A REFUND?
NO, BUT I TELL YOU WHAT IF I TORTURE AND KILL YOU, I WON'T EXPECT YOU TO PAY THE OUTSTANDING BALANCE

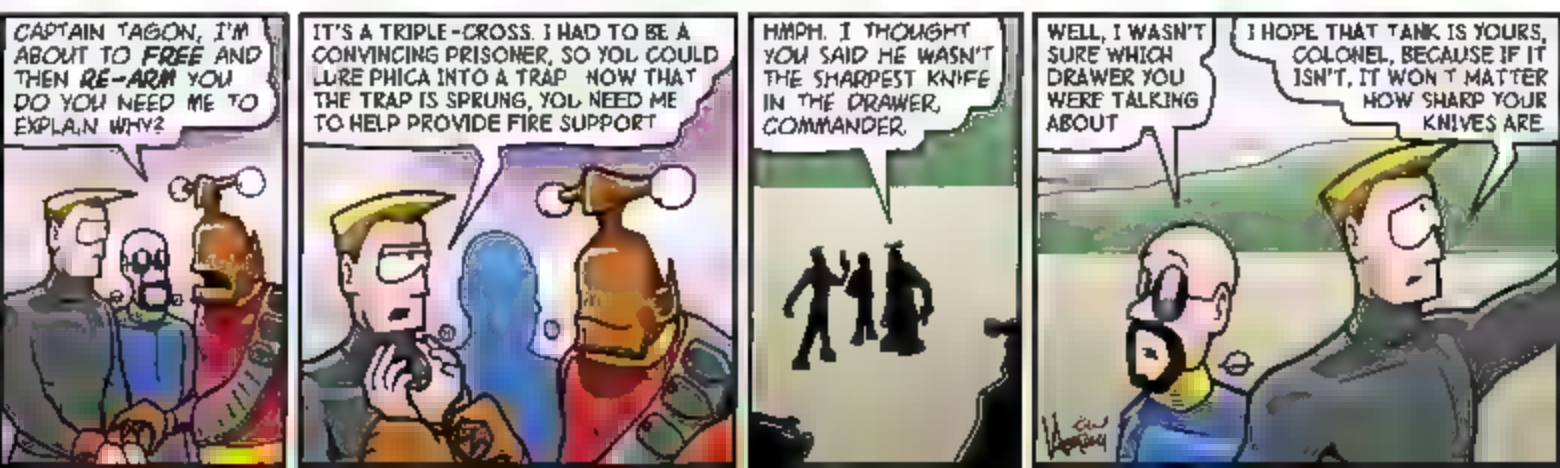

TEM PHICA, BY YOUR LEAVE, WE'LL TAKE THESE PRISONERS TO THE INTEGRITY FOR INTERROGATION.
I HAVE A PERFECTLY GOOD TORTURE CHAMBER HERE IN THE FORTRESS, COLONEL.
A FORTRESS WHICH HAS BEEN BREACHED BY ASSASSINS. HOW DO WE KNOW THEY DON'T HAVE RESCUERS WAITING IN THE WINGS?
I MUST BE PRESENT AT THE INTERROGATION. I INSIST.
I'LL CALL AHEAD AND WARN OUR INQUISITOR THAT HE NEEDS TO SHARE HIS TOYS.

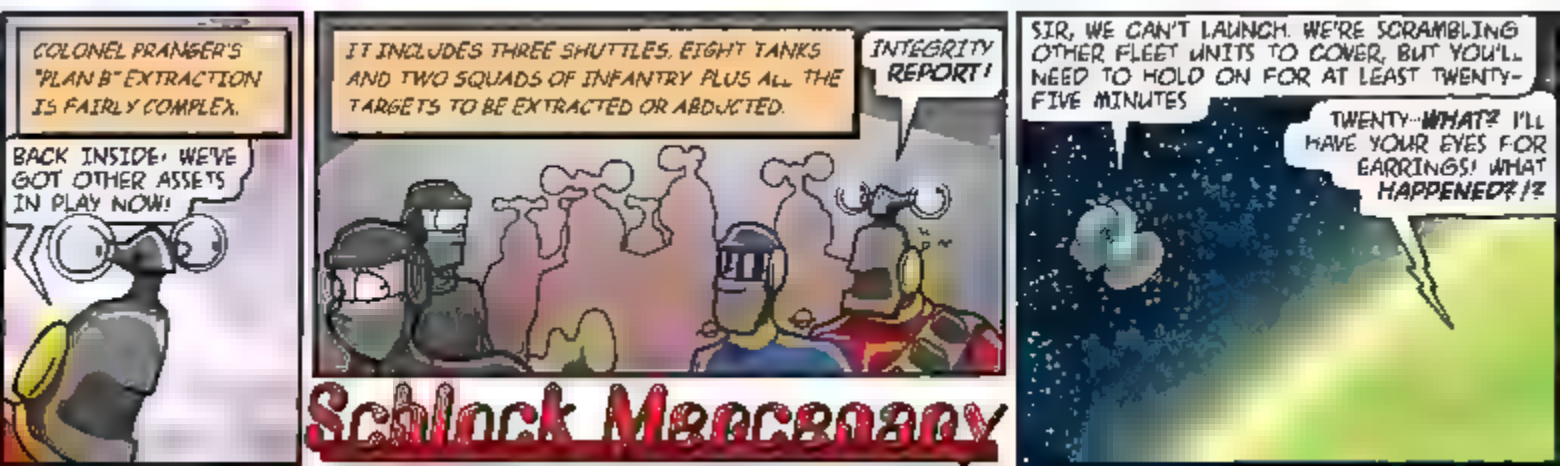

KEVYN, YOU LOOK AWFULLY CALM FOR SOMEBODY WHO HAS SOLD OUT HIS CAPTAIN AND THEN BEEN DOUBLE-CROSSED
I DO? OH. SORRY. MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN.
IS THAT "MAYBE YOU HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN," OR "MAYBE YOU'RE CALM BECAUSE YOU DO HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN?"
Maybe he's calm because he has no idea what the amorph n the bag s going to do to him when the bag gets opened.
MAYBE MY BOWELS ARE CLENCHING IN FEAR OR MAYBE THAT'S JUST MY LAST CHUPAQUESO MAKING ITSELF FELT

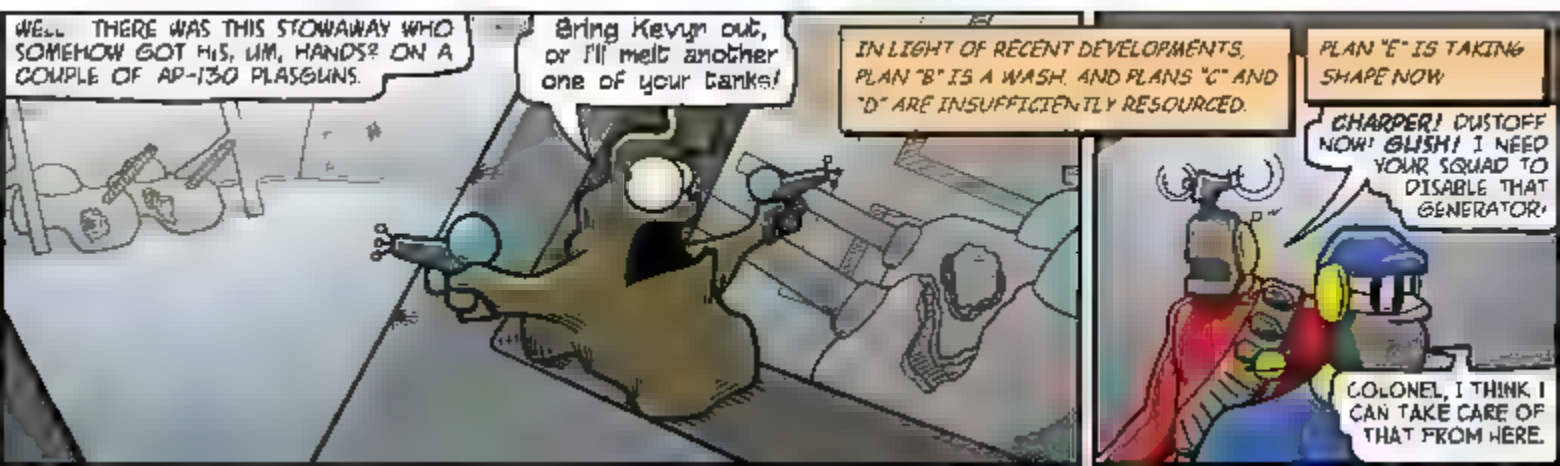

WE'RE JUST A QUICK SHUTTLE TRIP FROM THE INTEGRITY ALL ABOARD.
UHH... I CHANGED MY MIND. THE ASSASSINS COULD HAVE PLANNED THIS, AND SOMEONE COULD BE WAITING WITH A BREACHER TO SHOOT THE SHUTTLE DOWN
THEY COULD ALSO HAVE SUBORNED YOUR CLIMATE ENGINEERS. BETTER WATCH OUT FOR CLEAR-SKY LIGHTNING OUT HERE IN THE OPEN
GOOD POINT. EVERYBODY BACK INSIDE!
YOUR PARANOIA IS A POWERFUL DEFENSE AGAINST MY SARCASM.

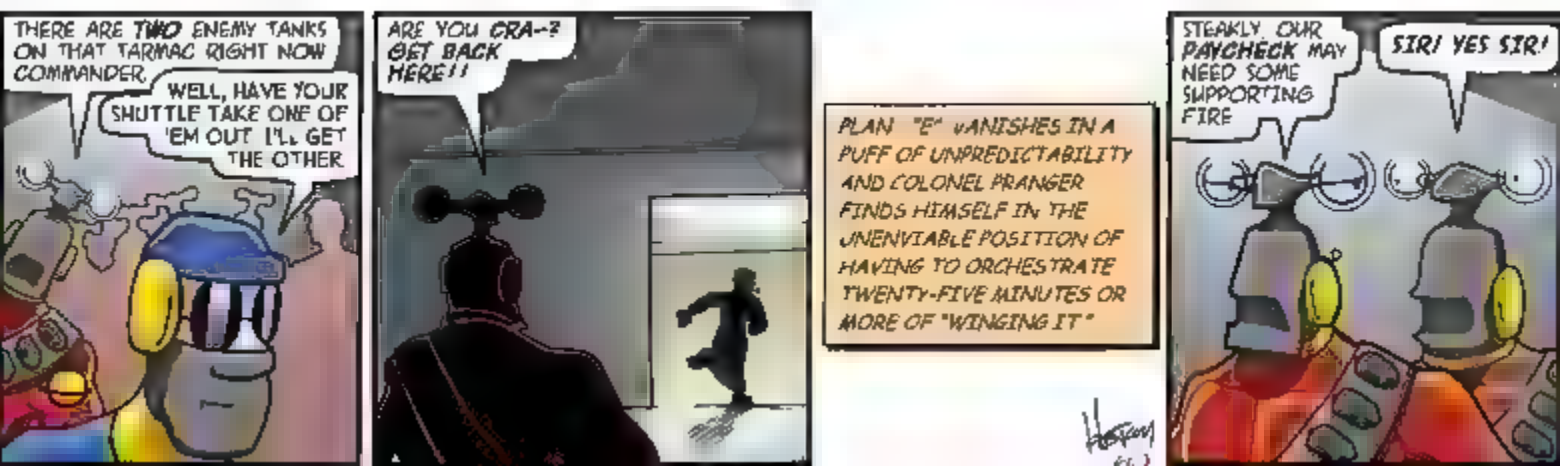

I'M NOT BEING PARANOID. I'M BEING SENSIBLE. HOW DO I KNOW I CAN TRUST YOU?
BECAUSE YOU'RE PAYING ME A LOT OF MONEY
THE MONKEY WITH GLASSES GAVE YOU MONEY TOO, AND HE'S IN SHACKLES RIGHT NOW
I. ERR.
YOU KNOW, YOU DO KIND OF LOOK LIKE A MONKEY.
BY ALL MEANS, SIR, RUB IT IN.

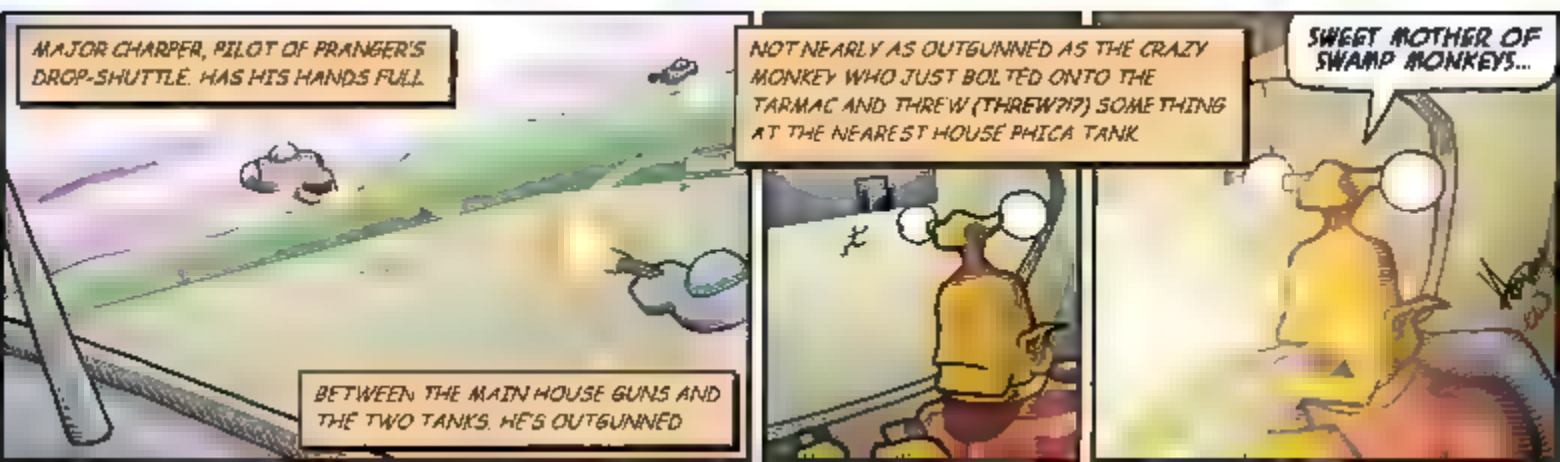

COLONEL, I'VE SUMMONED THE REST OF HOUSE PHICA'S FORCES. WE WILL BE SAFE BACK 'NSIDE THE FORTRESS.
WELL, THAT TEARS IT *PLAN B*, EVERYBODY
WHAT IS PLAN...
B?
AM I MISSING SOMETHING HERE?
YES. YOU'RE MISSING *CUFFS*. STEAKLY! MAKE IT QUICK!

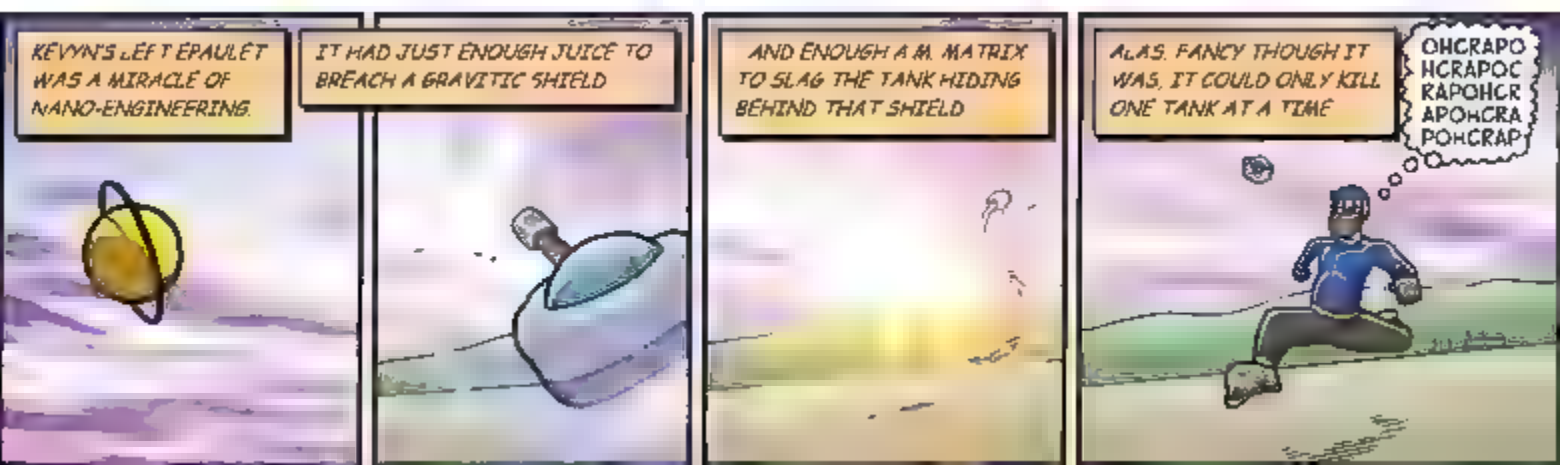

CAPTAIN TAGON, I'M ABOUT TO FREE AND THEN RE-ARM YOU DO YOU NEED ME TO EXPLAIN WHY?
IT'S A TRIPLE-CROSS. I HAD TO BE A CONVINCING PRISONER, SO YOU COULD LURE PHICA INTO A TRAP NOW THAT THE TRAP IS SPRUNG, YOU NEED ME TO HELP PROVIDE FIRE SUPPORT
HMPH. I THOUGHT YOU SAID HE WASN'T THE SHARPEST KNIFE IN THE DRAWER, COMMANDER.
WELL, I WASN'T SURE WHICH DRAWER YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT
I HOPE THAT TANK IS YOURS, COLONEL, BECAUSE IF IT ISN'T, IT WON'T MATTER HOW SHARP YOUR KNIVES ARE

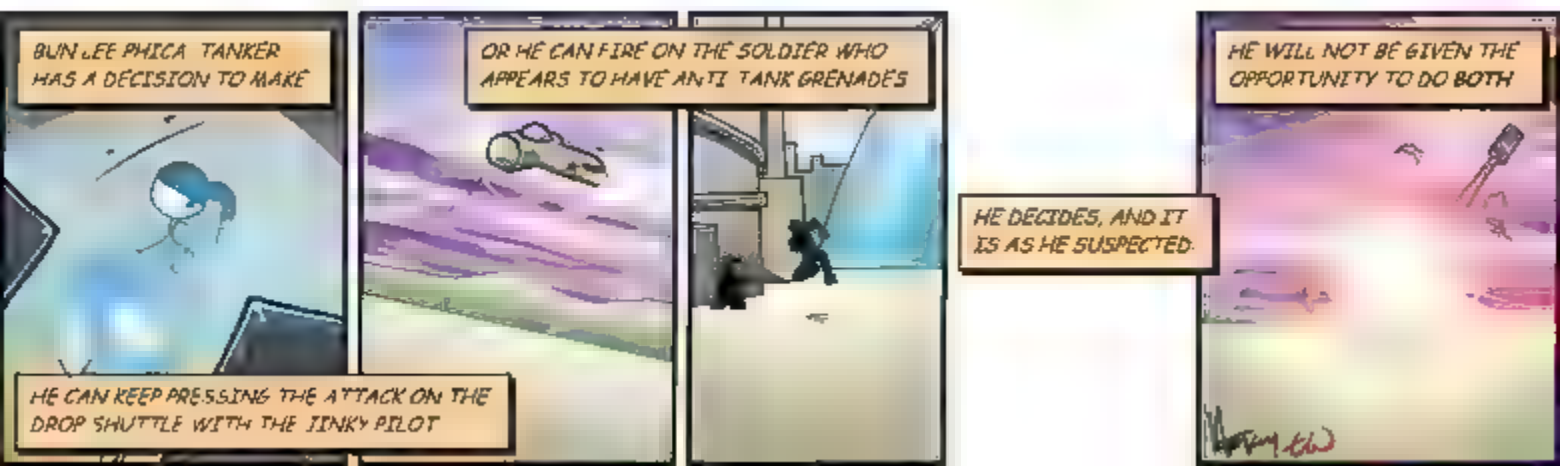

COLONEL PRANGER'S "PLAN B" EXTRACTION IS FAIRLY COMPLEX.
BACK INSIDE! WE'VE GOT OTHER ASSETS IN PLAY NOW!
IT INCLUDES THREE SHUTTLES, EIGHT TANKS AND TWO SQUADS OF INFANTRY PLUS ALL THE TARGETS TO BE EXTRACTED OR ABDUCTED.
INTEGRITY REPORT!
Schlock Mercenary
SIR, WE CAN'T LAUNCH. WE'RE SCRAMBLING OTHER FLEET UNITS TO COVER, BUT YOU'LL NEED TO HOLD ON FOR AT LEAST TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES
TWENTY--WHAT? I'LL HAVE YOUR EYES FOR EARRINGS! WHAT HAPPENED?!?

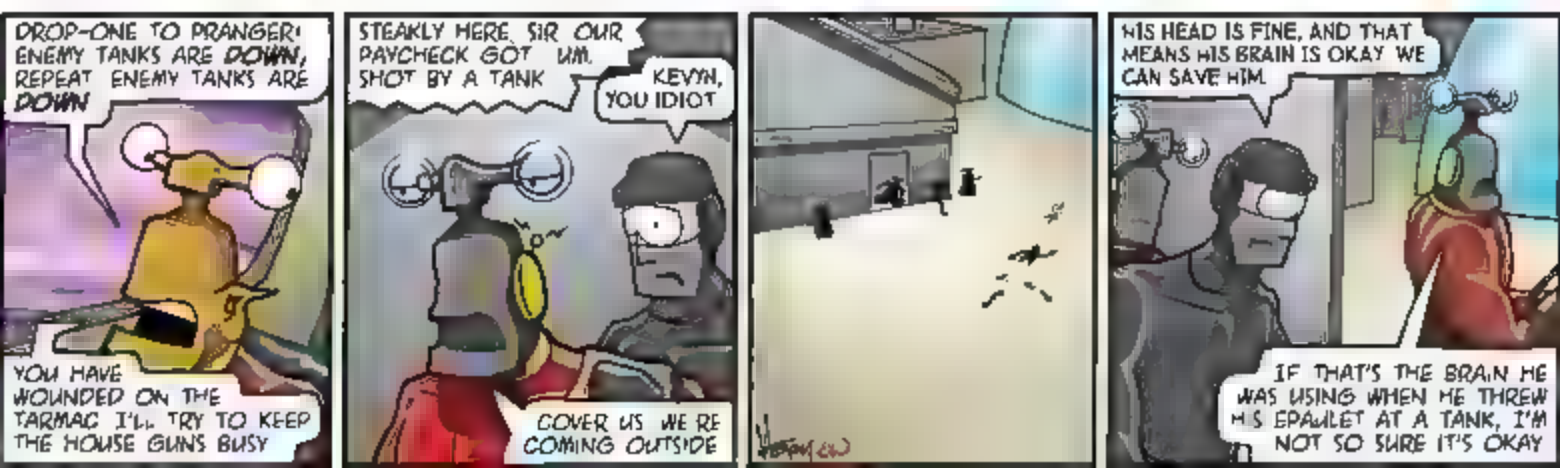

WELL... THERE WAS THIS STOWAWAY WHO SOMEHOW GOT HIS, UM, HANDS? ON A COUPLE OF AP-130 PLASGUNS.
Bring Kevyn out, or I'll melt another one of your tanks!
IN LIGHT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS, PLAN "B" IS A WASH, AND PLANS "C" AND "D" ARE INSUFFICIENTLY RESOURCED.
PLAN "E" IS TAKING SHAPE NOW.
CHARPER! DUSTOFF NOW! BUSH! I NEED YOUR SQUAD TO DISABLE THAT GENERATOR!
COLONEL, I THINK I CAN TAKE CARE OF THAT FROM HERE.


THERE ARE TWO ENEMY TANKS ON THAT TARMAC RIGHT NOW COMMANDER.
WELL, HAVE YOUR SHUTTLE TAKE ONE OF 'EM OUT. I'LL GET THE OTHER.
ARE YOU CRA--? GET BACK HERE!!
PLAN "E" VANISHES IN A PUFF OF UNPREDICTABILITY AND COLONEL PRANGER FINDS HIMSELF IN THE UNENVIABLE POSITION OF HAVING TO ORCHESTRATE TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES OR MORE OF "WINGING IT."
STEADY, OUR PAYCHECK MAY NEED SOME SUPPORTING FIRE.
SIR! YES SIR!

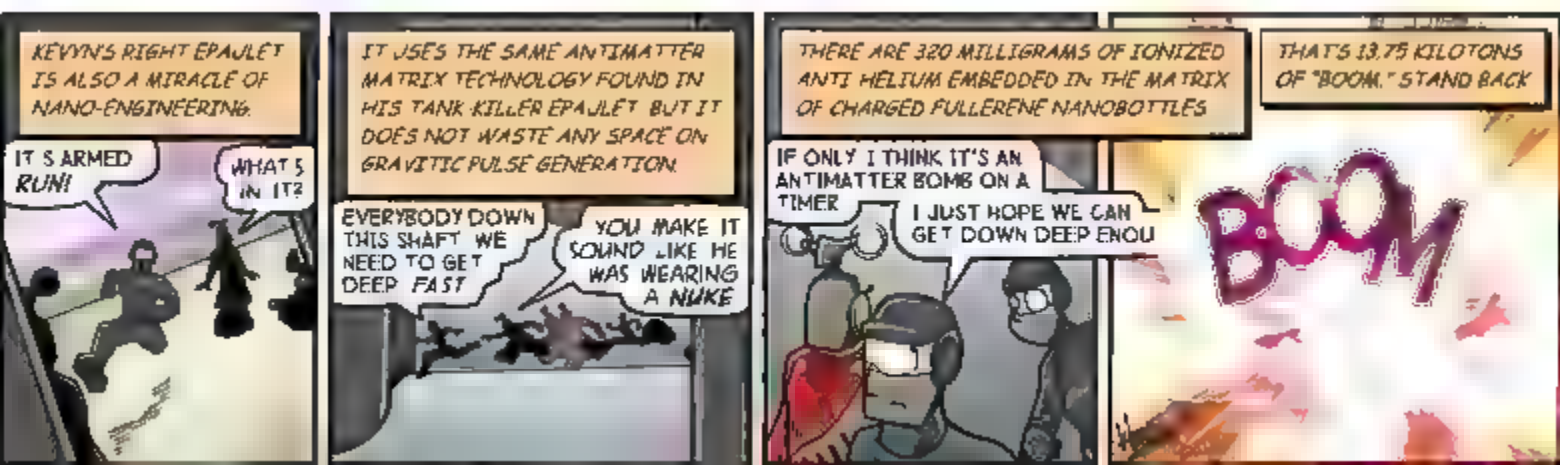

MAJOR CHARPER, PILOT OF PRANGER'S DROP-SHUTTLE. HAS HIS HANDS FULL.
BETWEEN THE MAIN HOUSE GUNS AND THE TWO TANKS, HE'S OUTGUNNED
NOT NEARLY AS OUTGUNNED AS THE CRAZY MONKEY WHO JUST BOLTED ONTO THE TARMAC AND THREW (THREW?!?) SOMETHING AT THE NEAREST HOUSE PHICA TANK
SWEET MOTHER OF SWAMP MONKEYS...

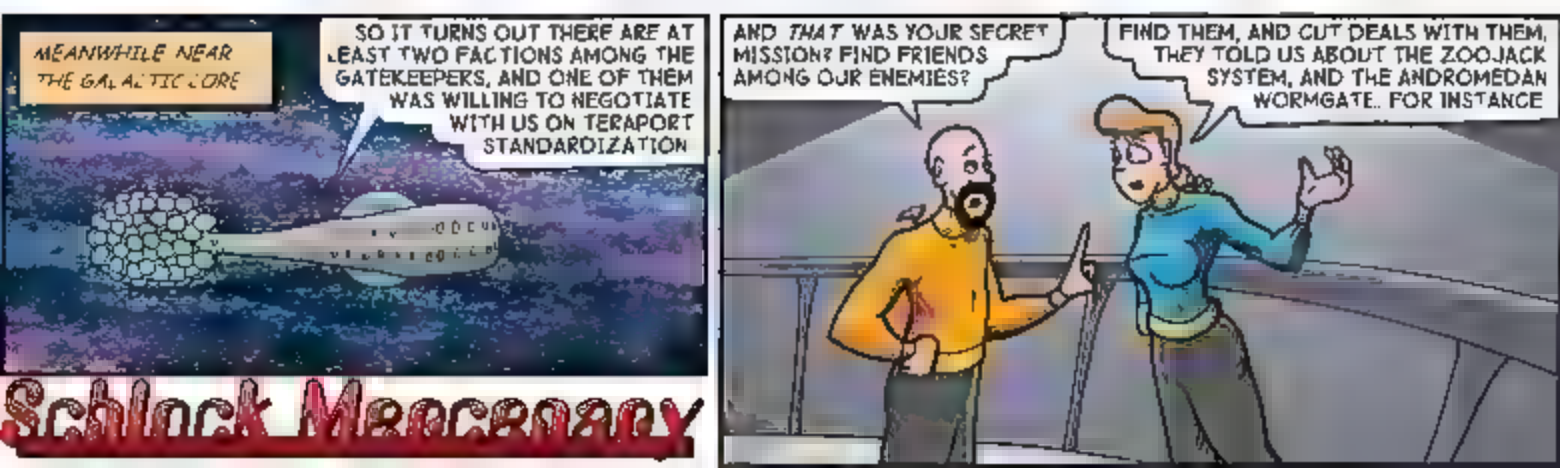

KEVYN'S LEFT EPAULET WAS A MIRACLE OF NANO-ENGINEERING.
IT HAD JUST ENOUGH JUICE TO BREACH A GRAVITIC SHIELD
AND ENOUGH A.M. MATRIX TO SLAG THE TANK HIDING BEHIND THAT SHIELD
ALAS. FANCY THOUGH IT WAS, IT COULD ONLY KILL ONE TANK AT A TIME
OHCRAPO HCRAPOC RAPOHCR APOHCRA POHCRAP

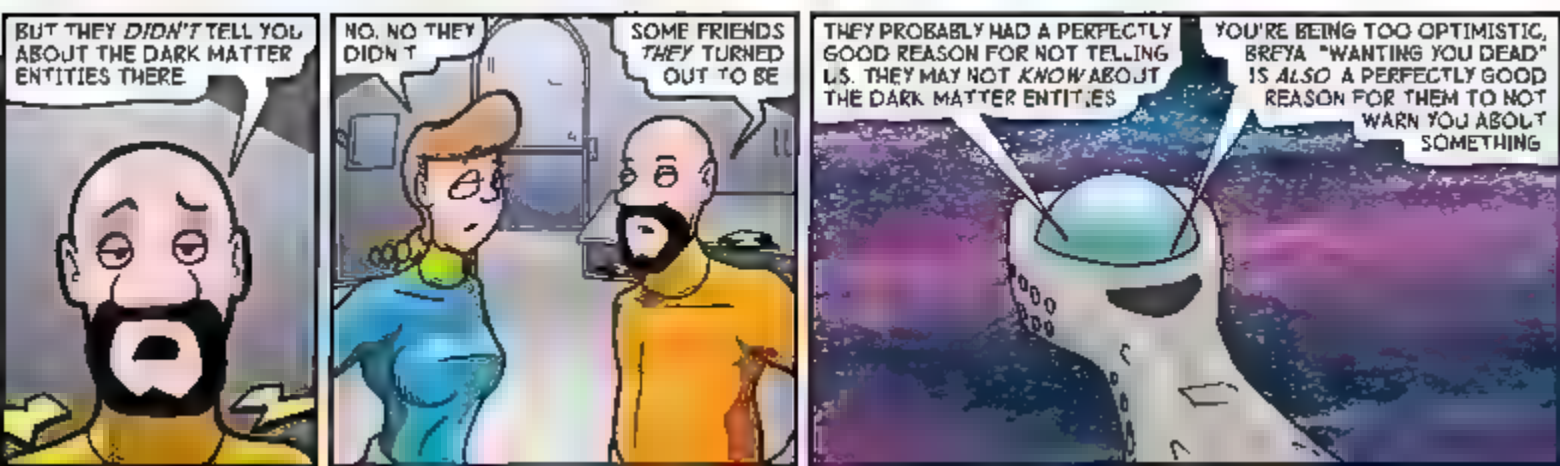

BUN LEE PHICA TANKER HAS A DECISION TO MAKE
HE CAN KEEP PRESSING THE ATTACK ON THE DROP SHUTTLE WITH THE JINKY PILOT
OR HE CAN FIRE ON THE SOLDIER WHO APPEARS TO HAVE ANTI TANK GRENADES
HE DECIDES, AND IT IS AS HE SUSPECTED.
HE WILL NOT BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO BOTH


DROP-ONE TO PRANGER! ENEMY TANKS ARE DOWN, REPEAT ENEMY TANKS ARE DOWN
YOU HAVE WOUNDED ON THE TARMAC I'LL TRY TO KEEP THE HOUSE GUNS BUSY
STEAKLY HERE, SIR OUR PAYCHECK GOT UM SHOT BY A TANK
KEVYN, YOU IDIOT
COVER US WE RE COMING OUTSIDE
HIS HEAD IS FINE, AND THAT MEANS HIS BRAIN IS OKAY WE CAN SAVE HIM
IF THAT'S THE BRAIN HE WAS USING WHEN HE THREW HIS EPAULET AT A TANK, I'M NOT SO SURE IT'S OKAY

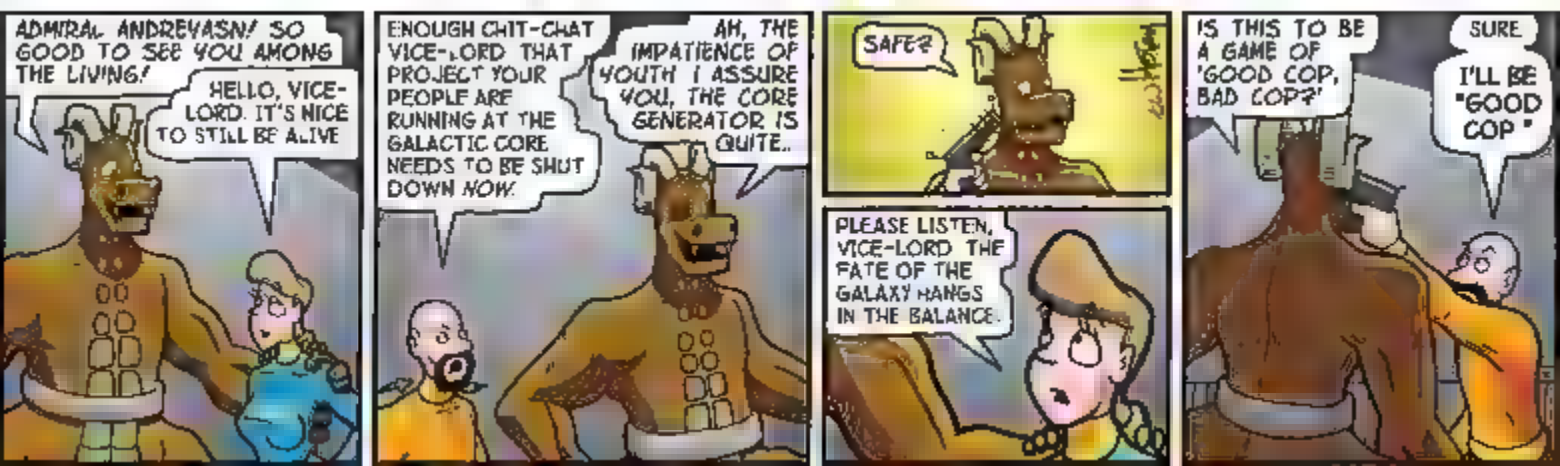
HE'S CONSCIOUS! KEVYN IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, WE'RE GOING TO NANNY-BAG YOUR HEAD YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE IT
..TSAAAAR.
DON'T TRY TO TALK, WE'RE
TSAAR HMMD
TSAR? WHAT'S TSAR?
SOMETHING ABOUT HIS OTHER EPAULET
YES, THAT'S YOUR BLOOD ON YOUR HAND. WE'RE GOING TO
NO, HE'S WRITING
Its ARMED

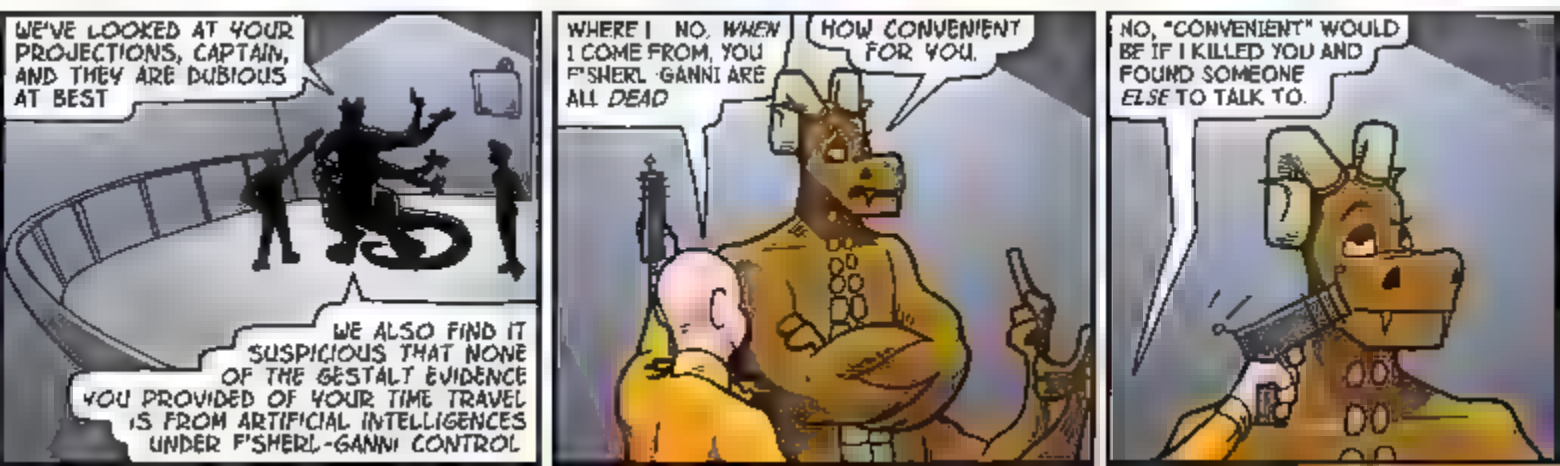

KEVYN'S RIGHT EPAULET IS ALSO A MIRACLE OF NANO-ENGINEERING.
IT'S ARMED RUN!
WHAT'S IN IT?
IT USES THE SAME ANTIMATTER MATRIX TECHNOLOGY FOUND IN HIS TANK-KILLER EPAULET BUT IT DOES NOT WASTE ANY SPACE ON GRAVITIC PULSE GENERATION.
EVERYBODY DOWN THIS SHAFT WE NEED TO GET DEEP FAST
YOU MAKE IT SOUND LIKE HE WAS WEARING A NUKE
THERE ARE 320 MILLIGRAMS OF IONIZED ANTI HELIUM EMBEDDED IN THE MATRIX OF CHARGED FULLERENE NANOBOTTLES
IF ONLY I THINK IT'S AN ANTIMATTER BOMB ON A TIMER
I JUST HOPE WE CAN GET DOWN DEEP ENOU
THAT'S 13.75 KILOTONS OF "BOOM." STAND BACK
BOOM


MEANWHILE NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE
SO IT TURNS OUT THERE ARE AT LEAST TWO FACTIONS AMONG THE GATEKEEPERS, AND ONE OF THEM WAS WILLING TO NEGOTIATE WITH US ON TERAPORT STANDARDIZATION
AND THAT WAS YOUR SECRET MISSION? FIND FRIENDS AMONG OUR ENEMIES?
FIND THEM, AND CUT DEALS WITH THEM. THEY TOLD US ABOUT THE ZOOJACK SYSTEM, AND THE ANDROMEDAN WORMGATE.. FOR INSTANCE
Schlock Mercenary

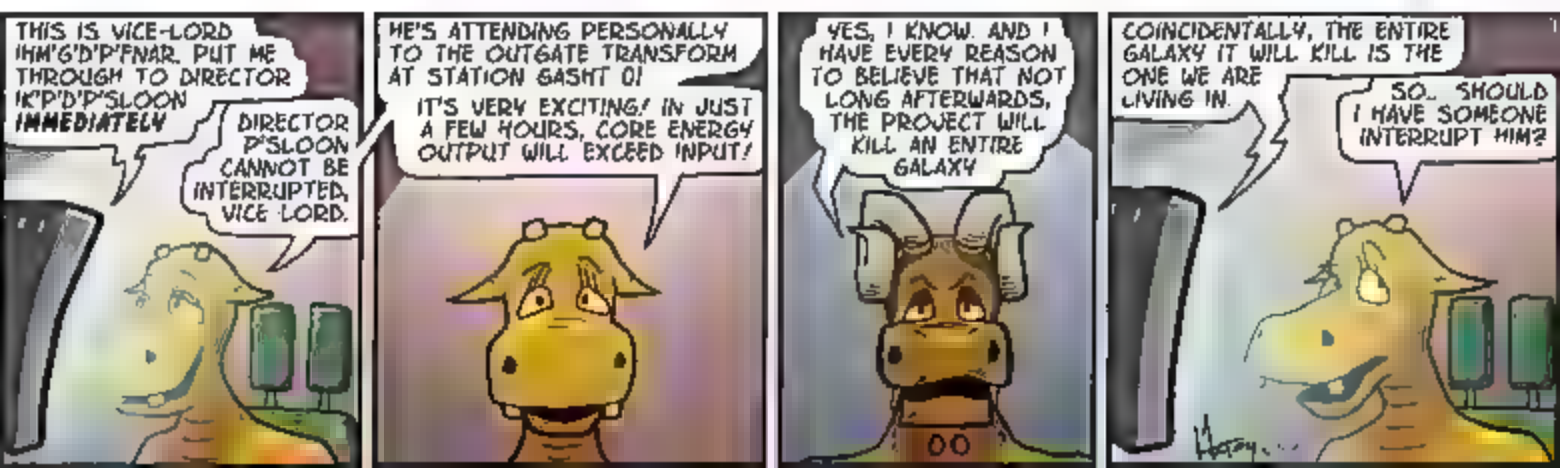

BUT THEY *DIDN'T* TELL YOU ABOUT THE DARK MATTER ENTITIES THERE
NO, NO THEY DIDN'T
SOME FRIENDS *THEY* TURNED OUT TO BE
THEY PROBABLY HAD A PERFECTLY GOOD REASON FOR NOT TELLING US. THEY MAY NOT *KNOW* ABOUT THE DARK MATTER ENTITIES
YOU'RE BEING TOO OPTIMISTIC, BREYA "WANTING YOU DEAD" IS *ALSO* A PERFECTLY GOOD REASON FOR THEM TO NOT WARN YOU ABOUT SOMETHING

YES, BUT THEN THEY'D NEED A PERFECTLY GOOD REASON TO WANT ME DEAD
COME ON! THE GATEKEEPERS HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR WHAT, A MILLION YEARS? MORE? THEY'VE BEEN MANIPULATING GALACTIC EVENTS WITH THEIR WORMGATE NETWORK SINCE BEFORE OUR ANCESTORS FELL OUT OF THE TREES. THEY'VE PROBABLY GOT ENTIRE LIBRARIES DEVOTED TO LISTING THE PERFECTLY GOOD REASONS TO WANT PEOPLE LIKE YOU DEAD
I'M QUITE SURE THAT MY ANCESTORS CLIMBED DOWN FROM THE TREES VERY GRACEFULLY
"AN ANNOYING TENDENCY TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT" IS PROBABLY ON ONE OF THEIR LISTS.

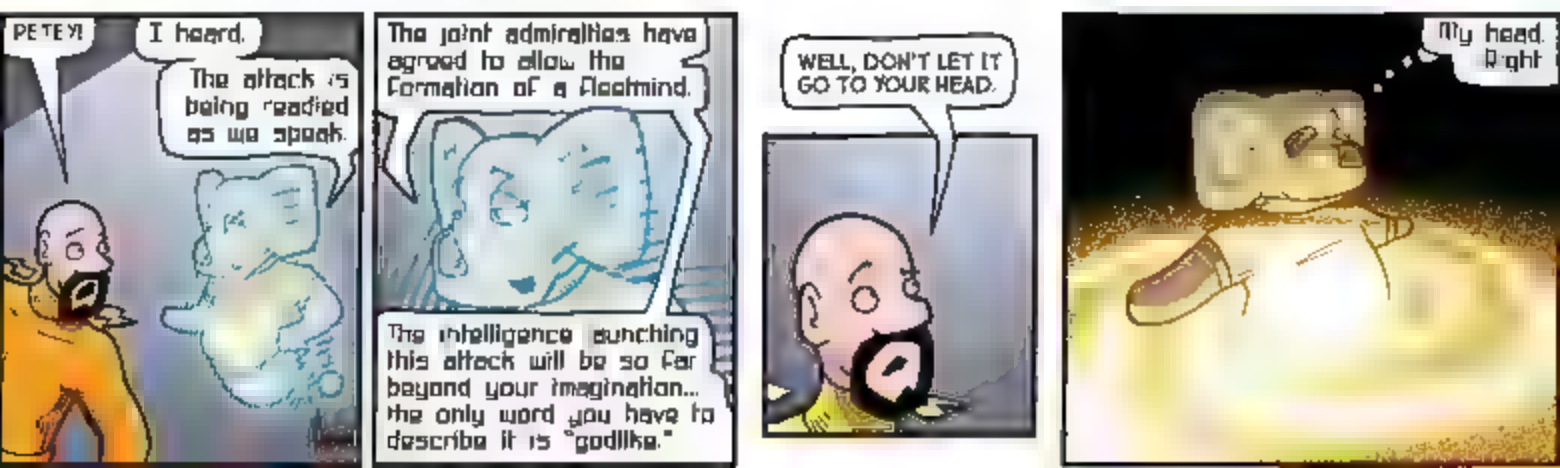

ADMIRAL ANDREYASN! SO GOOD TO SEE YOU AMONG THE LIVING!
HELLO, VICE-LORD. IT'S NICE TO STILL BE ALIVE
ENOUGH CHIT-CHAT VICE-LORD THAT PROJECT YOUR PEOPLE ARE RUNNING AT THE GALACTIC CORE NEEDS TO BE SHUT DOWN NOW.
AH, THE IMPATIENCE OF YOUTH I ASSURE YOU, THE CORE GENERATOR IS QUITE..
SAFE?
PLEASE LISTEN, VICE-LORD THE FATE OF THE GALAXY HANGS IN THE BALANCE.
IS THIS TO BE A GAME OF 'GOOD COP, BAD COP?'
SURE.
I'LL BE "GOOD COP."

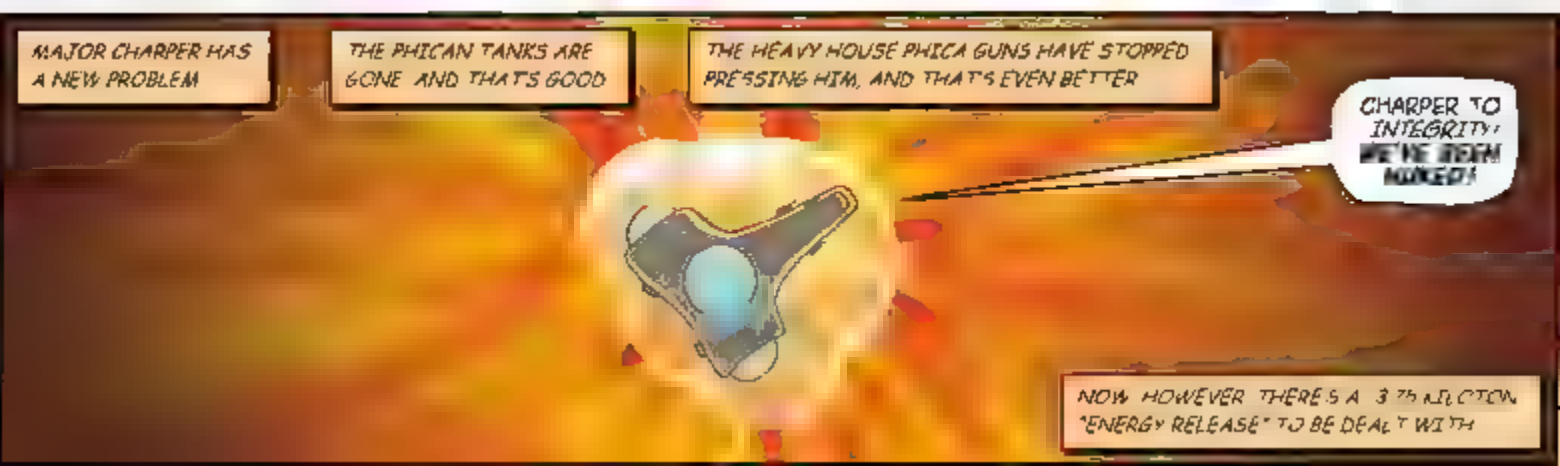

WE'VE LOOKED AT YOUR PROJECTIONS, CAPTAIN, AND THEY ARE DUBIOUS AT BEST
WE ALSO FIND IT SUSPICIOUS THAT NONE OF THE GESTALT EVIDENCE YOU PROVIDED OF YOUR TIME TRAVEL IS FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES UNDER F'SHERL-GANNI CONTROL
WHERE I NO, WHEN I COME FROM, YOU F'SHERL-GANNI ARE ALL DEAD
HOW CONVENIENT FOR YOU.
NO, "CONVENIENT" WOULD BE IF I KILLED YOU AND FOUND SOMEONE ELSE TO TALK TO.

CAPTAIN, YOU POSTULATED 'CLUMPS' OF ACTIVE DARK MATTER INTERACTING WITH OUR CORE GENERATOR, BUT OUR GRAVITIC SENSORS DETECT ONLY THE STATIC BACKGROUND OF DARK MATTER
IT'S THE SAME STATIC BACKGROUND WE'VE OBSERVED FOR THE LAST 20,000 OF YOUR YEARS, IN FACT
PUT YOUR PISTOL AWAY, AND I'LL SHOW YOU A REAL-TIME DISPLAY
FINE
LOOKS CLUMPY TO ME
OH, HEY THAT'S NEW
OH, HEY, WE'RE ALL GOING TO

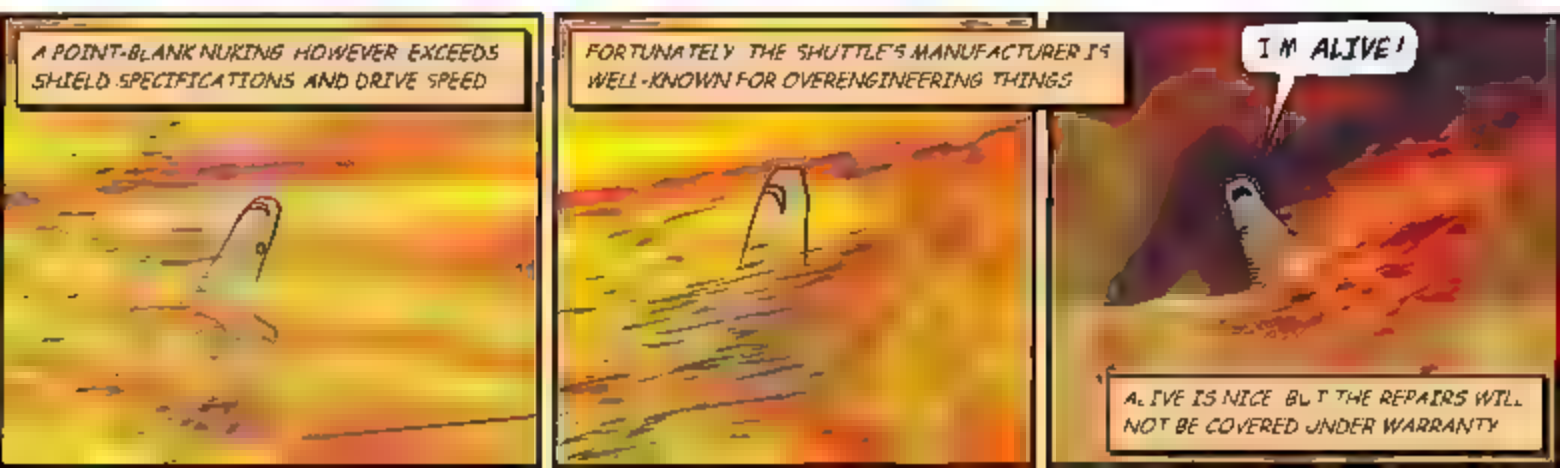

THIS IS VICE-LORD IHM'G'D'P'FNAR. PUT ME THROUGH TO DIRECTOR K'P'D'P'SLOON IMMEDIATELY
DIRECTOR P'SLOON CANNOT BE INTERRUPTED, VICE-LORD.
HE'S ATTENDING PERSONALLY TO THE OUTGATE TRANSFORM AT STATION GASHT 0!
IT'S VERY EXCITING! IN JUST A FEW HOURS, CORE ENERGY OUTPUT WILL EXCEED INPUT!
YES, I KNOW. AND I HAVE EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT NOT LONG AFTERWARDS, THE PROJECT WILL KILL AN ENTIRE GALAXY
COINCIDENTALLY, THE ENTIRE GALAXY IT WILL KILL IS THE ONE WE ARE LIVING IN.
SO... SHOULD I HAVE SOMEONE INTERRUPT HIM?

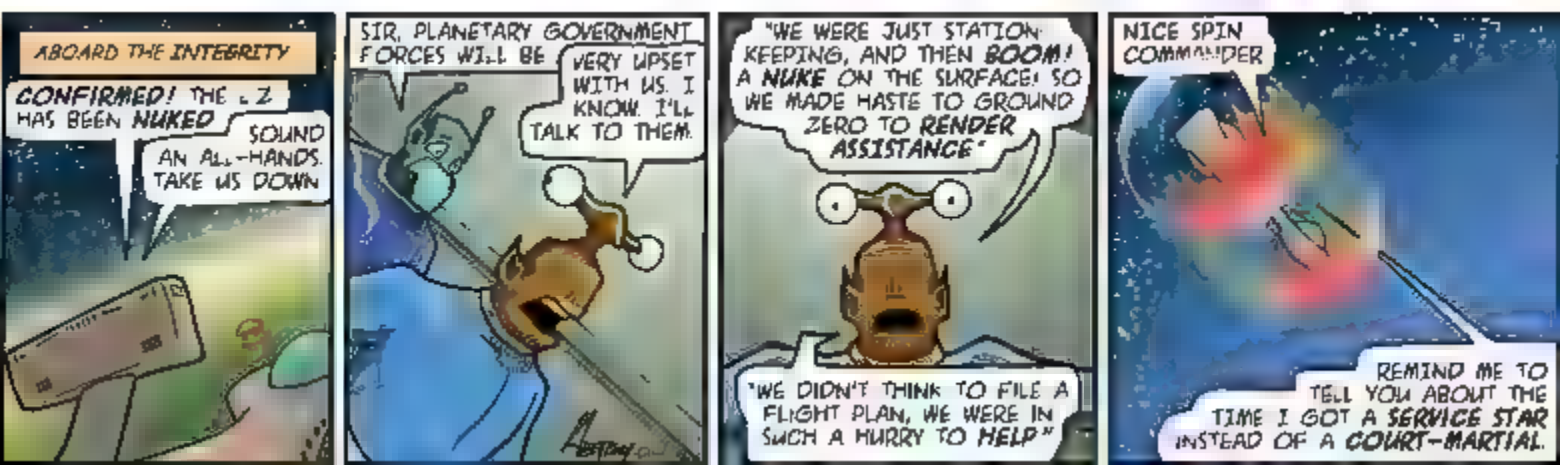
I'M ON HOLD!
THE FATE OF THE GALAXY IS AT STAKE, AND THEY'VE GOT YOU ON HOLD.
WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!? IS YOUR WHOLE RACE SO INSTITUTIONALLY ARROGANT THAT YOU CAN ACCIDENTALLY DESTROY EVERYTHING WITHIN A HUNDRED THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS WHILE WAITING ON HOLD?
THE MUSIC IS VERY SOOTHING.


PETEY!
I heard.
The attack is being readied as we speak.
The joint admiralties have agreed to allow the formation of a fleetmind.
The intelligence launching this attack will be so far beyond your imagination... the only word you have to describe it is "godlike."
WELL, DON'T LET IT GO TO YOUR HEAD.
My head. Right.

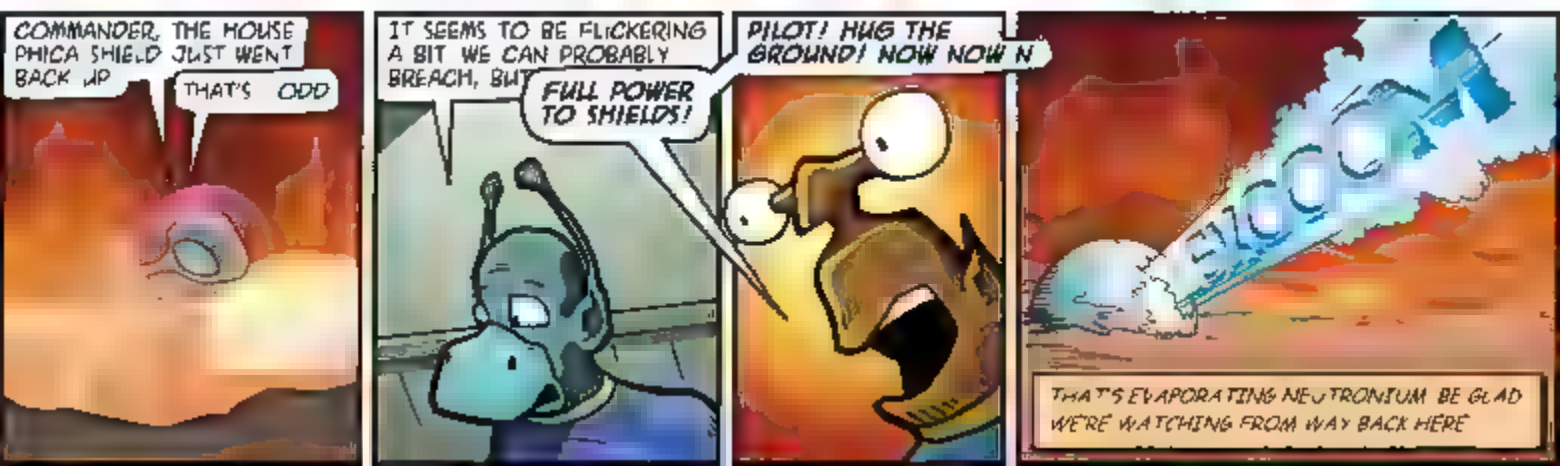

MAJOR CHARPER HAS A NEW PROBLEM
THE PHICAN TANKS ARE GONE AND THAT'S GOOD
THE HEAVY HOUSE PHICA GUNS HAVE STOPPED PRESSING HIM, AND THAT'S EVEN BETTER
CHARPER TO INTEGRITY: WE'VE BEEN NUKED!
NOW HOWEVER THERE'S A 3 TH ELECTRON "ENERGY RELEASE" TO BE DEALT WITH

Schlock Mercenary

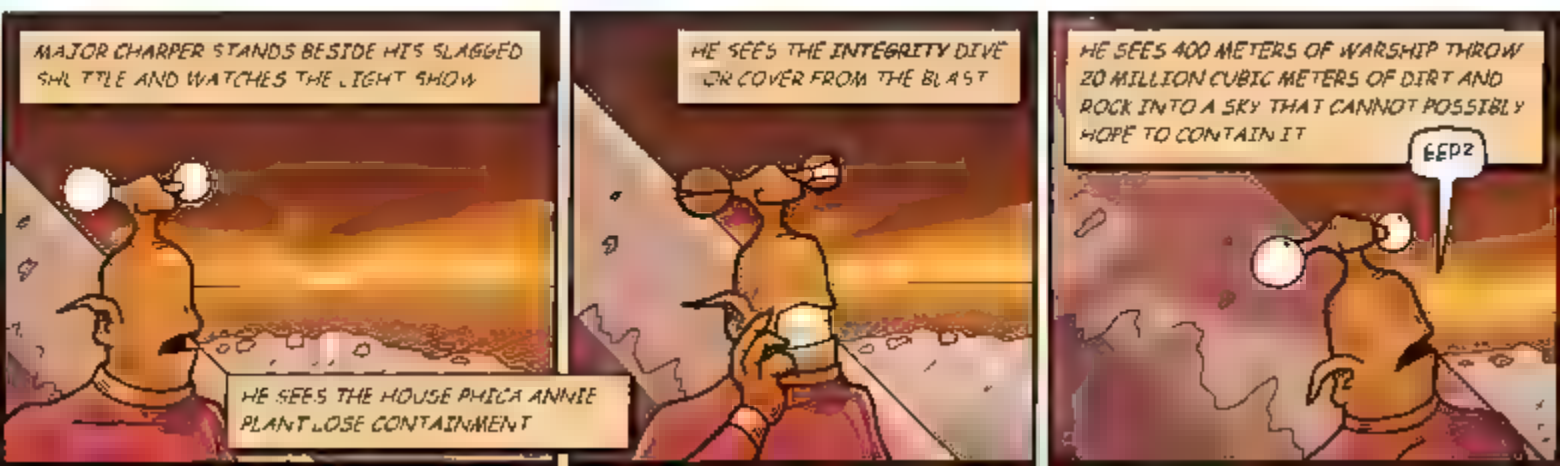

A POINT-BLANK NUKING HOWEVER EXCEEDS SHIELD SPECIFICATIONS AND DRIVE SPEED
FORTUNATELY THE SHUTTLE'S MANUFACTURER IS WELL-KNOWN FOR OVERENGINEERING THINGS
I'M ALIVE!
ALIVE IS NICE BUT THE REPAIRS WILL NOT BE COVERED UNDER WARRANTY

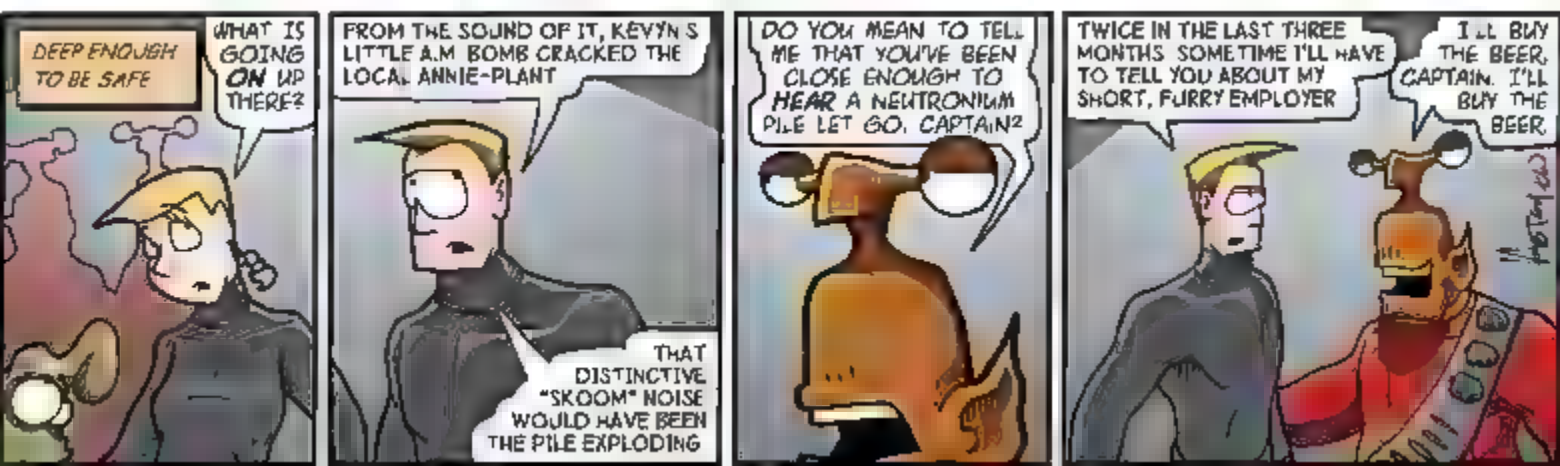

ABOARD THE INTEGRITY
CONFIRMED! THE L Z HAS BEEN NUKED
SOUND AN ALL-HANDS. TAKE US DOWN
SIR, PLANETARY GOVERNMENT FORCES WILL BE
VERY UPSET WITH US. I KNOW. I'LL TALK TO THEM.
"WE WERE JUST STATION KEEPING, AND THEN BOOM! A NUKE ON THE SURFACE! SO WE MADE HASTE TO GROUND ZERO TO RENDER ASSISTANCE"
"WE DIDN'T THINK TO FILE A FLIGHT PLAN, WE WERE IN SUCH A HURRY TO HELP"
NICE SPIN COMMANDER
REMIND ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE TIME I GOT A SERVICE STAR INSTEAD OF A COURT-MARTIAL.

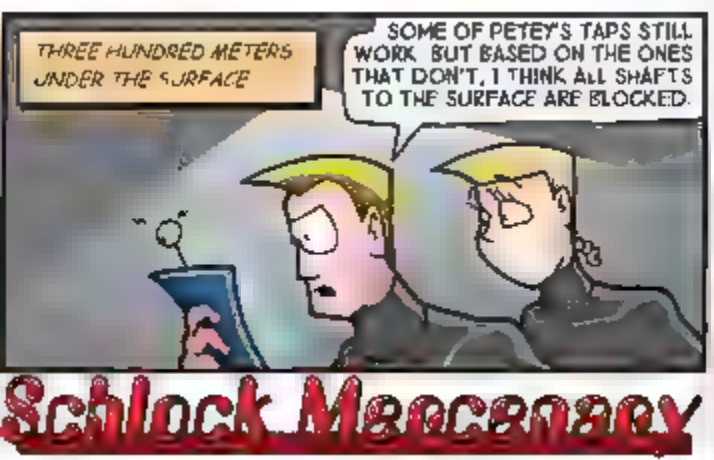
THE HOUSE PHICA PRIMARY GENERATOR WAS DESIGNED TO TAKE A LOT OF PUNISHMENT
A DIRECT HIT WITH A NUKE EVEN INSIDE THE GRAVITIC SHIELD IT POWERS, WILL NOT OF ITSELF CAUSE A LOSS OF CONTAINMENT
FOR THAT TO HAPPEN, THE REACTOR TECHS WOULD HAVE TO SPEND SEVERAL MINUTES DOING EVERYTHING EXACTLY WRONG.
PROTOCOL T-21 EXECUTING STEP-DOWN AND BLEED.
DROWN PROTOCOL! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! FULL POWER TO THE SHIELDS!
EXACTLY


COMMANDER, THE HOUSE PHICA SHIELD JUST WENT BACK UP
THAT'S ODD
IT SEEMS TO BE FLICKERING A BIT WE CAN PROBABLY BREACH, BUT
FULL POWER TO SHIELDS!
PILOT! HUG THE GROUND! NOW NOW N
ZIGGGG!
THAT'S EVAPORATING NEUTRONIUM BE GLAD WE'RE WATCHING FROM WAY BACK HERE

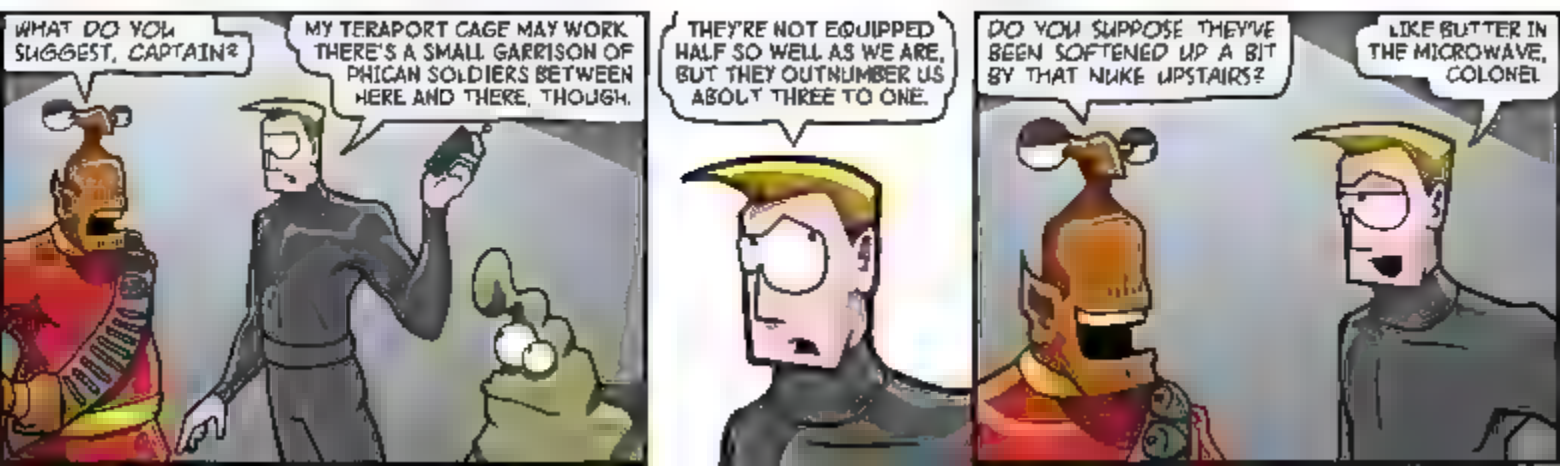
THE GRAVITIC SHIELDS ON THE INTEGRITY CAN DEFLECT A COLUMN OF EVAPORATING NEUTRONIUM JUST FINE
IT'S STILL A GOOD IDEA TO GET OUT OF THE LINE OF FIRE QUICKLY
WE'RE TAKING DAMAGE! SHIELDS ARE FAILING!
AND CAREFULLY QUICKLY AND CAREFULLY
PULL UP! YOU'RE TRYING TO DEFLECT THE PLANET AND IT'S NOT WORKING.


MAJOR CHARPER STANDS BESIDE HIS SLAGGED SHUTTLE AND WATCHES THE LIGHT SHOW
HE SEES THE HOUSE PHICA ANNIE PLANT LOSE CONTAINMENT
HE SEES THE INTEGRITY DIVE FOR COVER FROM THE BLAST
HE SEES 400 METERS OF WARSHIP THROW 20 MILLION CUBIC METERS OF DIRT AND ROCK INTO A SKY THAT CANNOT POSSIBLY HOPE TO CONTAIN IT
EEP?


DEEP ENOUGH TO BE SAFE
WHAT IS GOING ON UP THERE?
FROM THE SOUND OF IT, KEVYN'S LITTLE A.M BOMB CRACKED THE LOCAL ANNIE-PLANT
THAT DISTINCTIVE "SKOOM" NOISE WOULD HAVE BEEN THE PILE EXPLODING
DO YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU'VE BEEN CLOSE ENOUGH TO HEAR A NEUTRONIUM PILE LET GO, CAPTAIN?
TWICE IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS SOMETIME I'LL HAVE TO TELL YOU ABOUT MY SHORT, FURRY EMPLOYER
I'LL BUY THE BEER, CAPTAIN. I'LL BUY THE BEER.


THREE HUNDRED METERS UNDER THE SURFACE
SOME OF PETEY'S TAPS STILL WORK BUT BASED ON THE ONES THAT DON'T, I THINK ALL SHAFTS TO THE SURFACE ARE BLOCKED.
Schlock Mercenary

I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THE INTEGRITY. I CAN'T REACH THEM.
WE DON'T WANT TO WAIT FOR THEM TO TRY TO DIG US OUT. AFTER THAT EXPLOSION THE SURFACE WILL BE CRAWLING WITH PLANETARY MILITIA


WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST, CAPTAIN?
MY TERAPORT CAGE MAY WORK. THERE'S A SMALL GARRISON OF PHICAN SOLDIERS BETWEEN HERE AND THERE, THOUGH.
THEY'RE NOT EQUIPPED HALF SO WELL AS WE ARE, BUT THEY OUTNUMBER US ABOUT THREE TO ONE.
DO YOU SUPPOSE THEY'VE BEEN SOFTENED UP A BIT BY THAT NUKE UPSTAIRS?
LIKE BUTTER IN THE MICROWAVE, COLONEL.

WELL IF THEY'RE GOING TO PLAY THE PART OF SOFTENED BUTTER, THAT LEAVES US PLAYING THE PART OF "HOT KNIFE"

Knife, butter... all that's missing is the toast

LET'S GO MAKE SOME, SERGEANT

NOTE: THE KNIFE-THROUGH-BUTTER METAPHOR IS INACCURATE IN THIS CASE.

TYPICALLY WHEN ONE CUTS BUTTER WITH A KNIFE THE BUTTER DOES NOT END UP SPATTERED ON THE WALLS.

A MORE ACCURATE VISUAL METAPHOR HAS BEEN SUPPLIED BELOW.

READERS OF YESTERDAY'S STRIP HAVE ALREADY EXPRESSED DISMAY. APPARENTLY THE EFFORT PUT INTO SETTING UP THE METAPHOR OF "CHAINSAW THROUGH BUTTER" TO DESCRIBE THE MANNER WITH WHICH TAGON AND PRANGER WILL GO THROUGH THE PHICAN GARRISON HAS PEOPLE BELIEVING THEY WONT ACTUALLY GET TO SEE THE CHAINSAW GO THROUGH THE BUTTER.
NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH.
FRENCH CANADIAN LUMBERJACK PIERRE FRANCOIS DULAC SHALL NOW DEMONSTRATE!
MON CANARD EST EN FEU!!
BEURRE DU QUÉBEC
MERCI PIERRE!
PAS DE PROBLEME

IT HAS COME TO OUR ATTENTION THAT READERS OF "SCHLOCK MERCENARY" ARE NOT INTERESTED IN WATCHING A FRENCH CANADIAN LUMBERJACK GO THROUGH A STICK OF BUTTER WITH A CHAINSAW

WE'VE ALSO BEEN TOLD THAT THE FRENCH BATTLE-CRY "MY DUCK IS ON FIRE" IS UNLIKELY APPARENTLY FRENCH CANADIANS ARE MORE PASSIONATE ABOUT GEESE

WITH APOLOGIES FOR YESTERDAY'S INSTALLMENT WE PROUDLY PRESENT A HARD-BITTEN AMERICAN LUMBERJACK HANK HOUSTON!

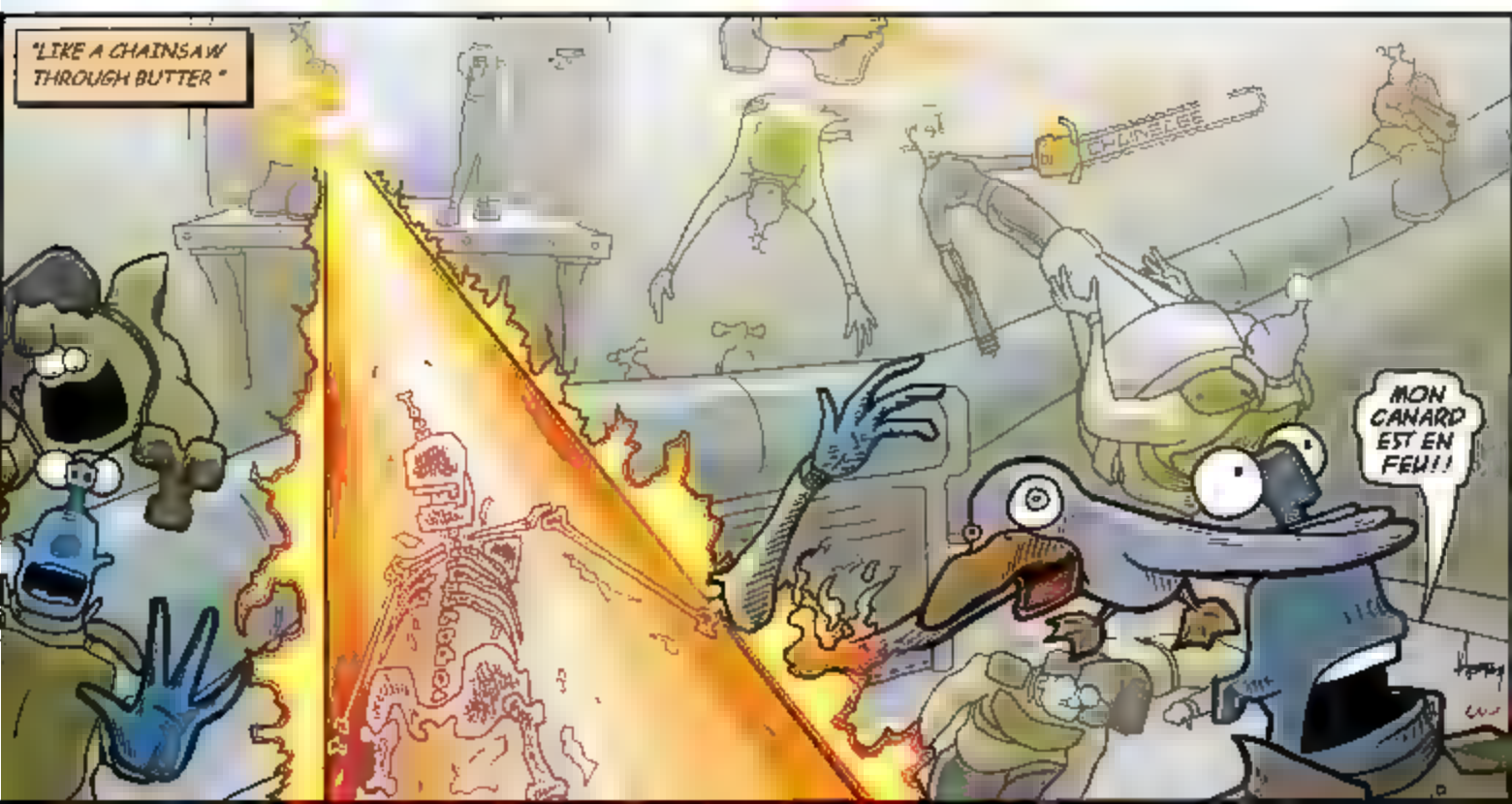
PLEASED TA MEETCHA

LAND O' LAKES

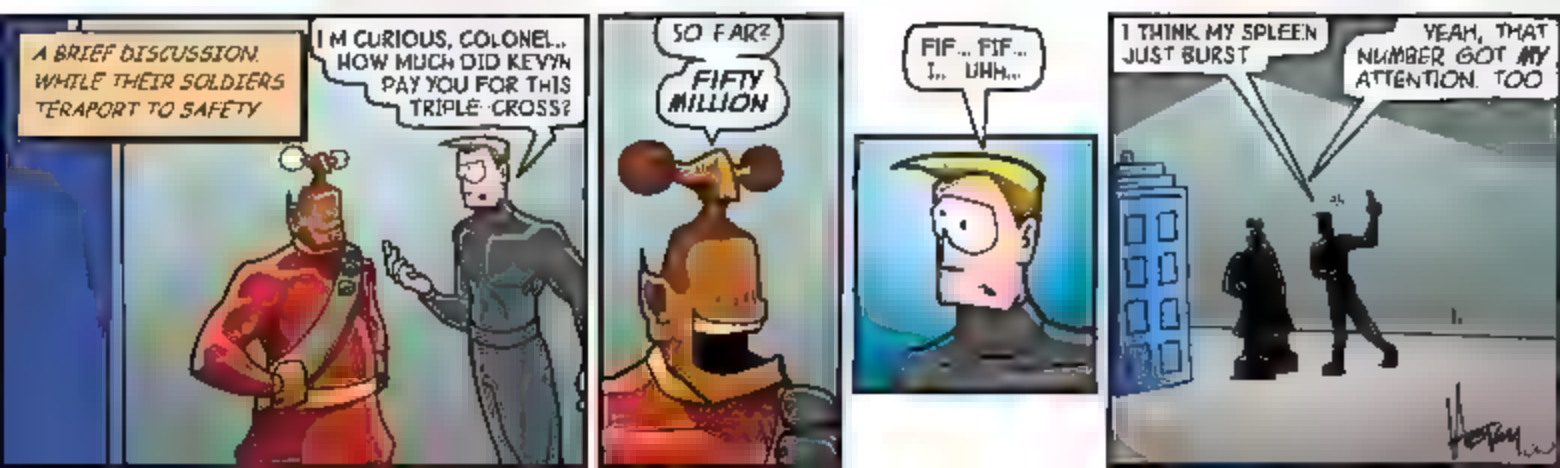
LAND O LAKES

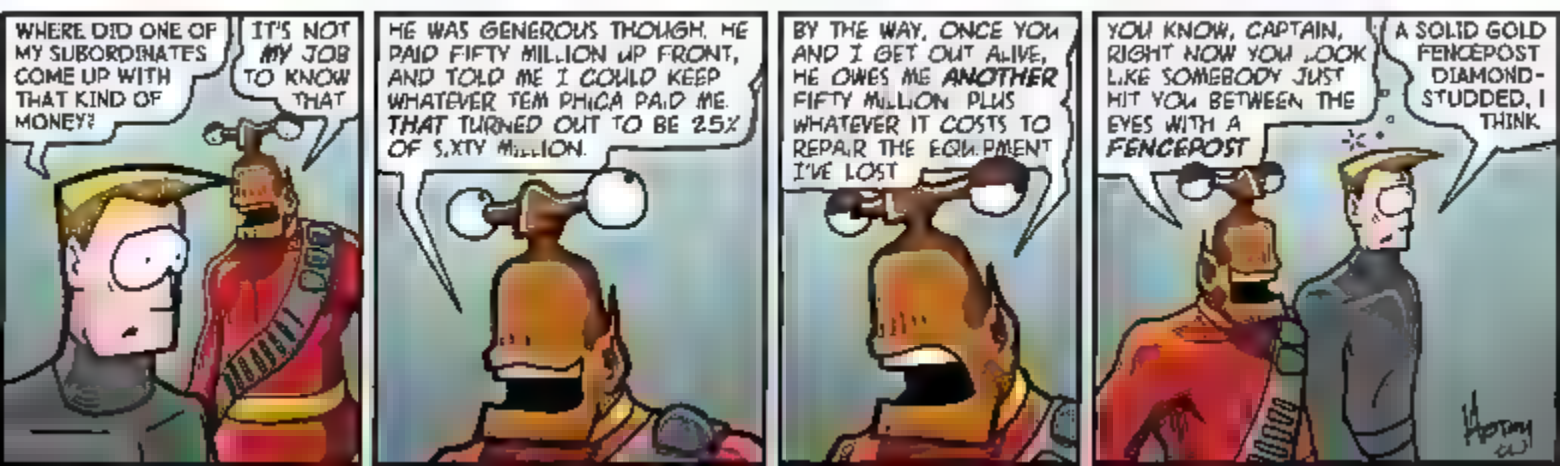
I'M GOING TO STOP COMPLAINING ABOUT "MEANWHILE AT THE GALACTIC CORE" NOW

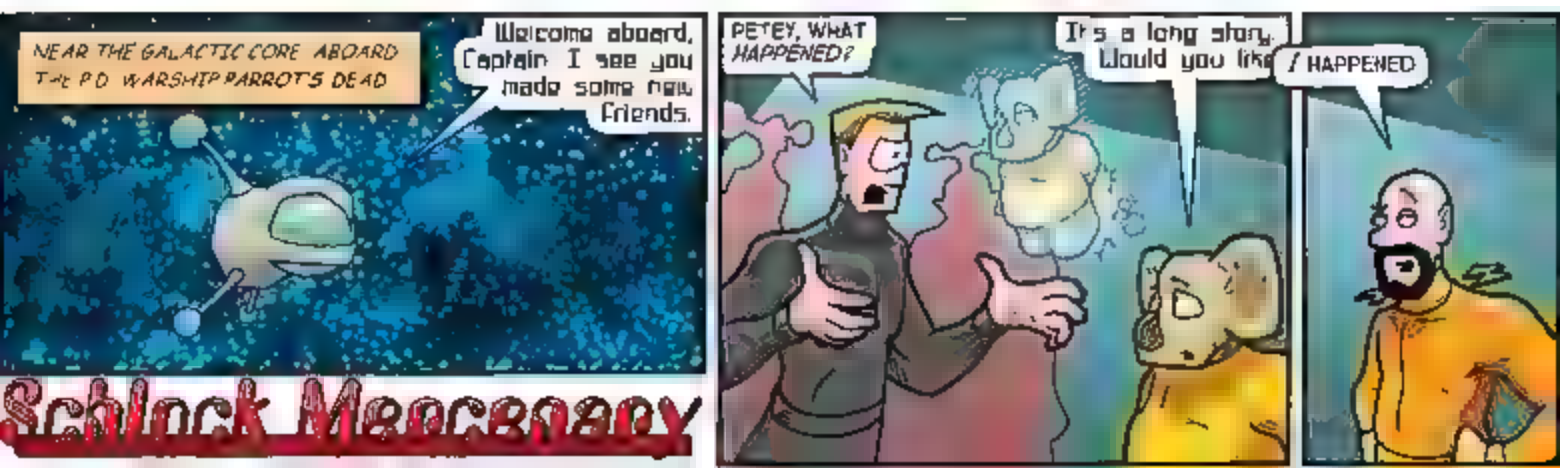
HANK'S REALLY WORKING THAT BUTTER


"LIKE A CHAINSAW THROUGH BUTTER"
MON CANARD EST EN FEU!!

THIS IS PERFECT. ANTI-TERAPORT ACTIVITY IS LOW WE CAN GET EVERYONE OUT
WE HAVE TO GO NO MORE THAN ABOUT FOUR AT A TIME, THOUGH
SO... WHO DO WE SEND FIRST?
HOW ABOUT ONE OF YOUR TROOPS, ONE OF MINE AND THE PRISONER
Send me, sir Nanny-bag or no. Kevyn's head smells a little gamey.
AH, YES. PLEASE LET'S KEEP MY PAYCHECK FROM GOING "GAMEY"


A BRIEF DISCUSSION. WHILE THEIR SOLDIERS TERAPORT TO SAFETY
I'M CURIOUS, COLONEL... HOW MUCH DID KEVYN PAY YOU FOR THIS TRIPLE-CROSS?
SO FAR?
FIFTY MILLION
FIF... FIF... I... UHH...
I THINK MY SPLEEN JUST BURST
YEAH, THAT NUMBER GOT MY ATTENTION, TOO


WHERE DID ONE OF MY SUBORDINATES COME UP WITH THAT KIND OF MONEY?
IT'S NOT MY JOB TO KNOW THAT
HE WAS GENEROUS THOUGH. HE PAID FIFTY MILLION UP FRONT, AND TOLD ME I COULD KEEP WHATEVER TEM PHICA PAID ME. THAT TURNED OUT TO BE 25% OF SIXTY MILLION.
BY THE WAY, ONCE YOU AND I GET OUT ALIVE, HE OWES ME ANOTHER FIFTY MILLION PLUS WHATEVER IT COSTS TO REPAIR THE EQUIPMENT I'VE LOST
YOU KNOW, CAPTAIN, RIGHT NOW YOU LOOK LIKE SOMEBODY JUST HIT YOU BETWEEN THE EYES WITH A FENCEPOST
A SOLID GOLD FENCEPOST DIAMOND-STUDDED, I THINK

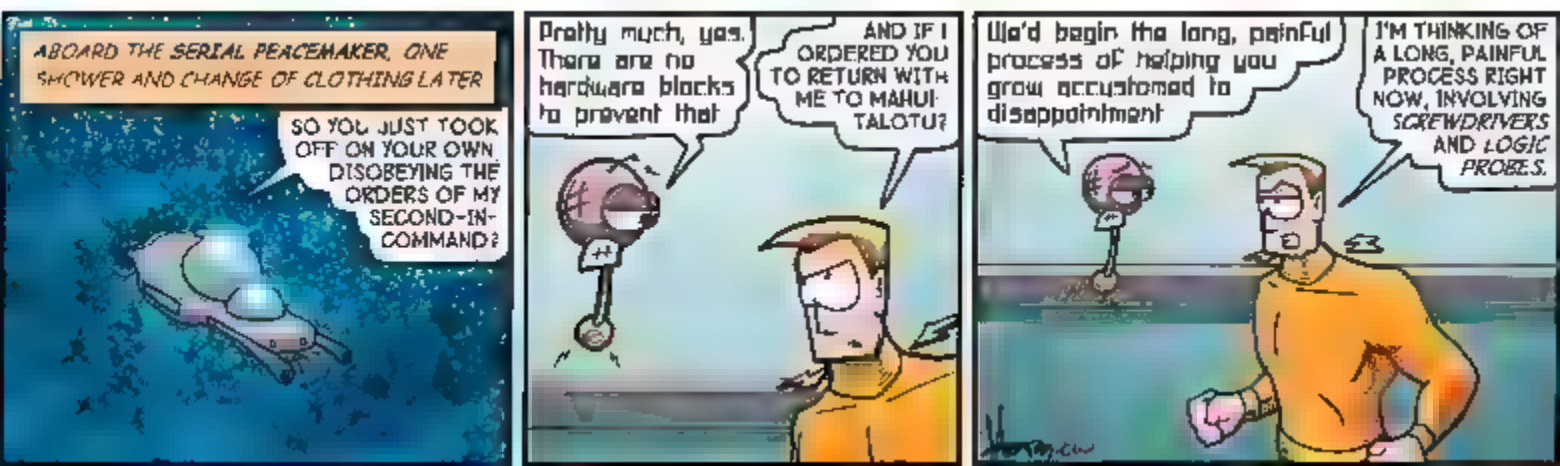

NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE ABOARD THE P.D. WARSHIP PARROT'S DEAD
Welcome aboard, Captain. I see you made some new friends.
Schlock Mercenary
PETEY, WHAT HAPPENED?
It's a long story. Would you like
I HAPPENED

I KNOW THAT YOU SHOWED UP WITH PRANGER. AND.
YOU'RE WEARING MY SHIRT
AND CAPTAIN'S BOLTS.
AND YOU'RE NOT BLOWN IN HALF ANYMORE.
AND YOU LOOK SMUG.
I'M FROM THE FUTURE.

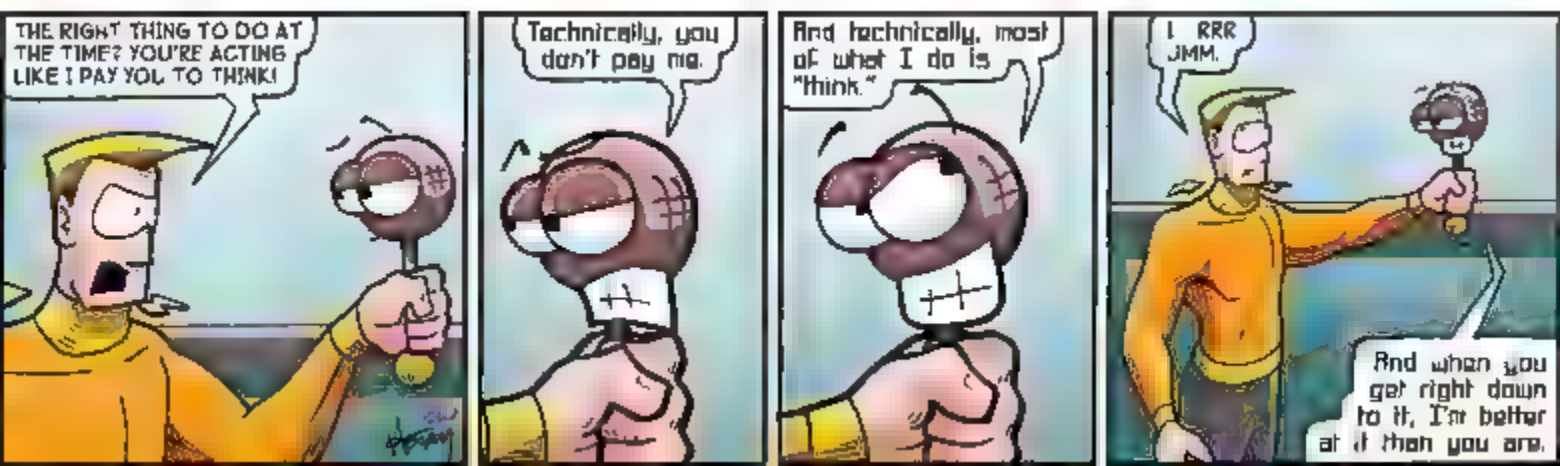
IN MY PAST YOU WERE KILLED IN PHICA'S FORTRESS, I BECAME CAPTAIN IN YOUR PLACE. AND THEN DARK MATTER ENTITIES HIJACKED A F'SHERL-GANNI ZERO-POINT-ENERGY GENERATOR AT THE GALACTIC CORE AND DESTROYED THE ENTIRE GALAXY
FORTUNATELY, THE GALACTIC CALAMITY MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR ME TO TRAVEL BACK IN TIME, WHERE WE COULD DO THINGS A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY
OKAY, THAT STORY MAY PLAY WITH EVERYBODY ELSE, BUT I KNOW YOU BETTER THAN THAT
I KNOW YOU DID THIS JUST SO YOU'D HAVE A BACKUP OF YOURSELF, SO YOU COULD TRY OUT THAT ANTIMATTER GRENADE
OOOH! HOW'D IT WORK?

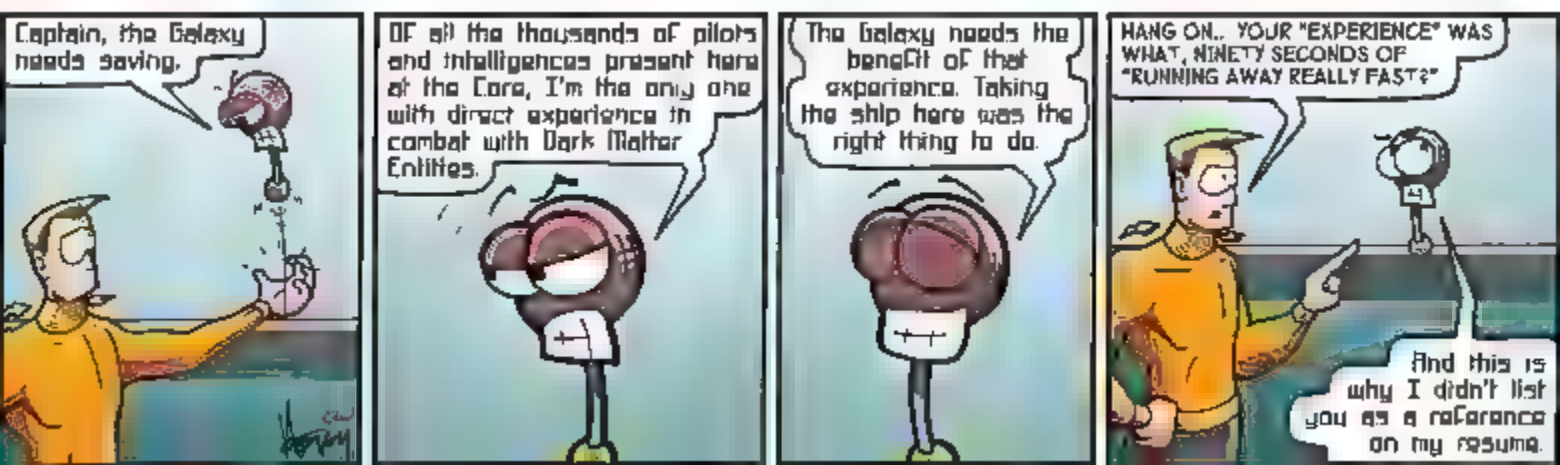
WAIT YOU'RE FROM THE FUTURE?
YES YES I AM
AND THE ONE WITH THE GLASSES AND THE RIDICULOUSLY DANGEROUS EPAULETS, IS THAT ALSO YOU?
IT'S COMPLICATED, BUT YES.
WELL THEN. THAT EXPLAINS A LOT
SO. ARE YOU CARRYING ANY ANTIMATTER?
YES, BUT ONLY A LITTLE

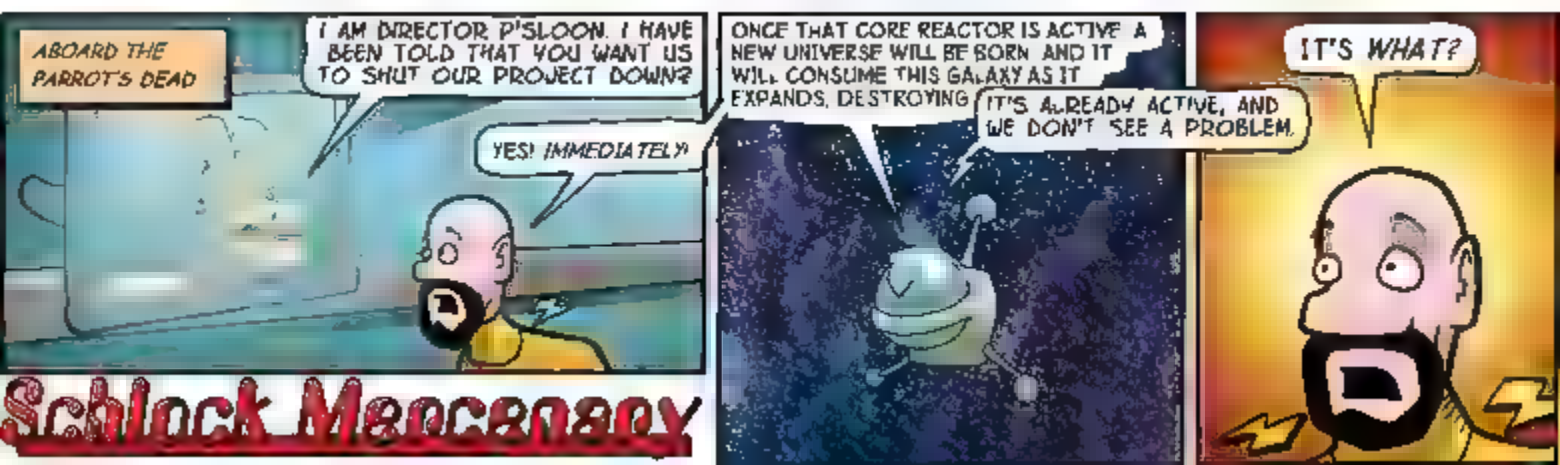
Captain, if you'd like to 'port over to the *Serial Peacemaker*, I think you could use a change of clothes.
"PORT OVER?" WHAT'S MY SHIP DOING OUT HERE WITH YOU?
Helping.
ON WHOSE AUTHORITY? THAT'S *MY SHIP*, PETEY, NOT *YOURS*.
I never said it was mine.
WELL THEN WHO...
Hey, let's argue about this after you've stopped smelling like sewer.

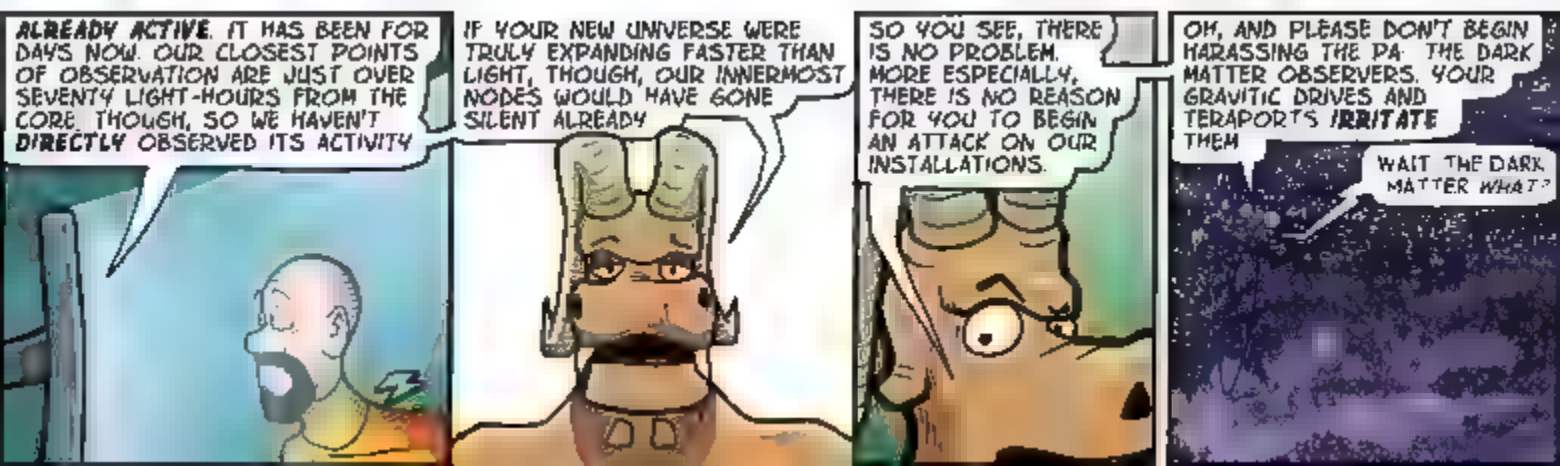

ABOARD THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER, ONE SHOWER AND CHANGE OF CLOTHING LATER
SO YOU JUST TOOK OFF ON YOUR OWN, DISOBEYING THE ORDERS OF MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND?
Pretty much, yes. There are no hardware blocks to prevent that
AND IF I ORDERED YOU TO RETURN WITH ME TO MAHUI-TALOTU?
We'd begin the long, painful process of helping you grow accustomed to disappointment
I'M THINKING OF A LONG, PAINFUL PROCESS RIGHT NOW, INVOLVING SCREWDRIVERS AND LOGIC PROBES.

Captain, I'm fairly unique among artificial intelligences. I am FREE.
I work for you because I *want* to. I fly your ship for you because I *enjoy it*. I am compelled to accept orders only by my conscience.
This makes me on equal with the rest of your troops. They aren't hard-wired to obey you, yet they'll follow you to the ends of the Universe.
YES, BUT NONE OF THEM CAN *STEAL MY SHIP*.
None of them are smart enough to know that it was the right thing to do at the time.

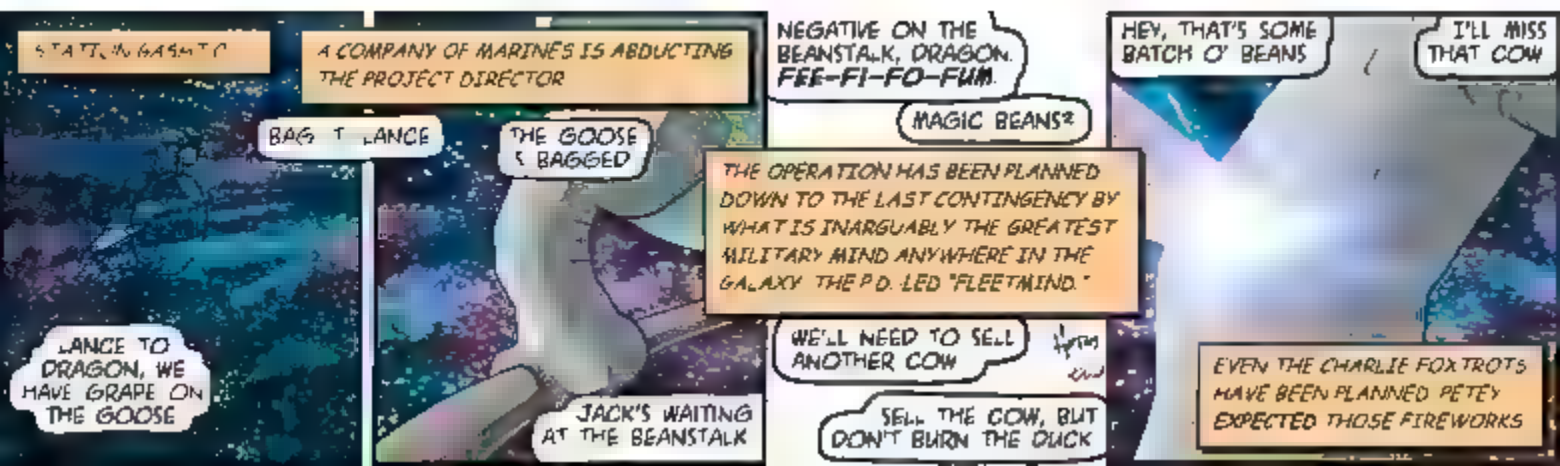

THE RIGHT THING TO DO AT THE TIME? YOU'RE ACTING LIKE I PAY YOU TO THINK!
Technically, you don't pay me.
And technically, most of what I do is "think."
I RRR JMM.
And when you get right down to it, I'm better at it than you are.

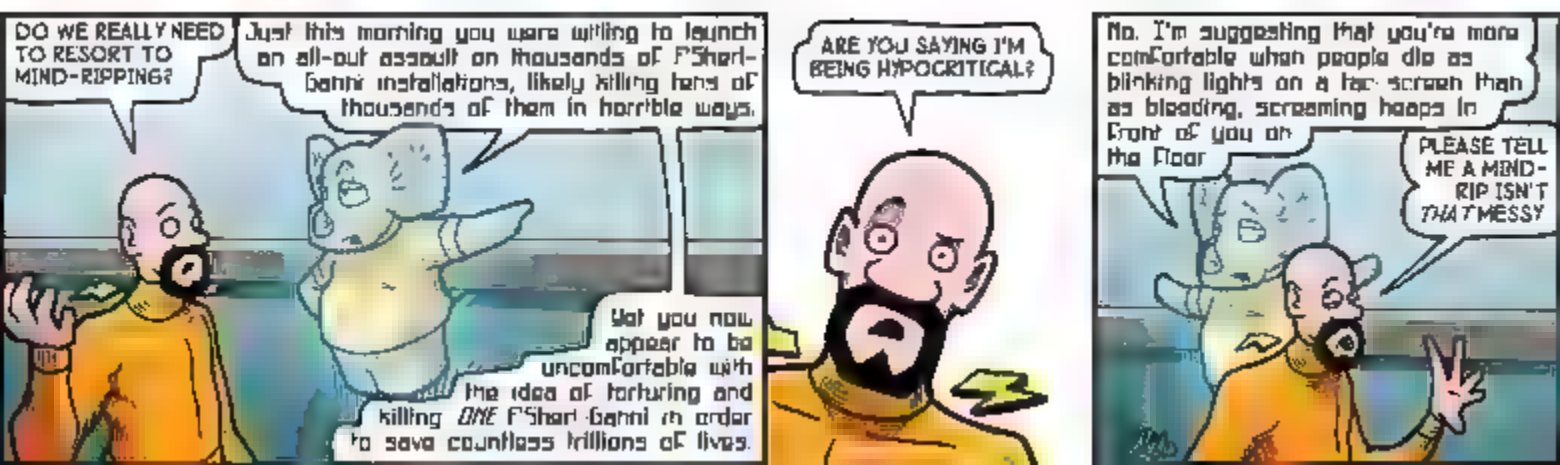

Captain, the Galaxy needs saving.
Of all the thousands of pilots and intelligences present here at the Core, I'm the only one with direct experience in combat with Dark Matter Entities.
The Galaxy needs the benefit of that experience. Taking the ship here was the right thing to do.
HANG ON.. YOUR "EXPERIENCE" WAS WHAT, NINETY SECONDS OF "RUNNING AWAY REALLY FAST?"
And this is why I didn't list you as a reference on my resume.

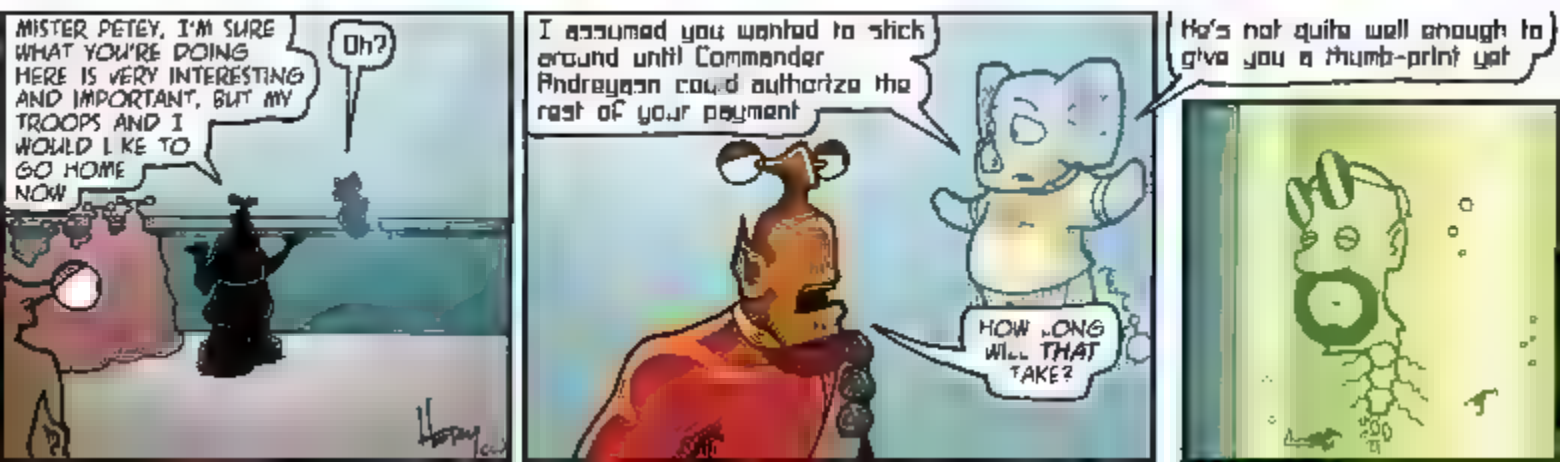

ABOARD THE PARROT'S DEAD
I AM DIRECTOR P'SLOON. I HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT YOU WANT US TO SHUT OUR PROJECT DOWN?
YES! IMMEDIATELY!
ONCE THAT CORE REACTOR IS ACTIVE A NEW UNIVERSE WILL BE BORN AND IT WILL CONSUME THIS GALAXY AS IT EXPANDS, DESTROYING
IT'S ALREADY ACTIVE, AND WE DON'T SEE A PROBLEM.
IT'S WHAT?
Schlock Mercenary


ALREADY ACTIVE. IT HAS BEEN FOR DAYS NOW. OUR CLOSEST POINTS OF OBSERVATION ARE JUST OVER SEVENTY LIGHT-HOURS FROM THE CORE. THOUGH, SO WE HAVEN'T DIRECTLY OBSERVED ITS ACTIVITY
IF YOUR NEW UNIVERSE WERE TRULY EXPANDING FASTER THAN LIGHT, THOUGH, OUR INNERMOST NODES WOULD HAVE GONE SILENT ALREADY
SO YOU SEE, THERE IS NO PROBLEM. MORE ESPECIALLY, THERE IS NO REASON FOR YOU TO BEGIN AN ATTACK ON OUR INSTALLATIONS.
OH, AND PLEASE DON'T BEGIN HARASSING THE PA- THE DARK MATTER OBSERVERS. YOUR GRAVITIC DRIVES AND TERAPORTS IRRITATE THEM
WAIT. THE DARK MATTER WHAT?

THIS SITUATION IS WELL IN HAND, CAPTAIN. GOODBYE
NO. WAIT!
AAARGH! HE HAD INFORMATION WE COULD HAVE USED.
He still does.
YES, WELL I DON'T THINK HE'LL ANSWER IF I CALL HIM BACK.
No, he won't
And that is because a company of marines from the Chicxulub will be collecting him momentarily for a mind rip.
WE JUST CROSSED A LINE SOMEWHERE. I CAN TELL.

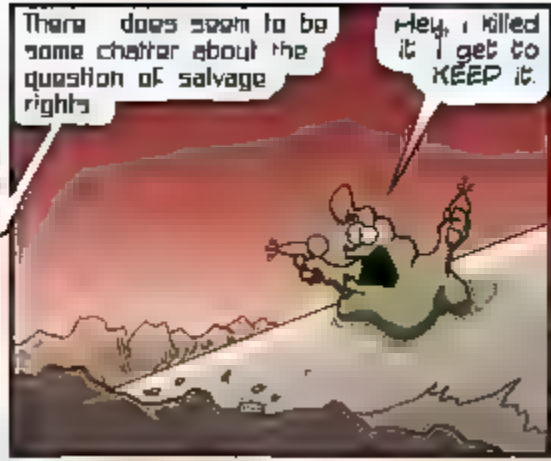

STATION GAMMA
A COMPANY OF MARINES IS ABDUCTING THE PROJECT DIRECTOR
BAG THE LANCE
THE GOOSE IS BAGGED
LANCE TO DRAGON, WE HAVE GRAPE ON THE GOOSE
JACK'S WAITING AT THE BEANSTALK
NEGATIVE ON THE BEANSTALK, DRAGON. FEE-FI-FO-FUM.
MAGIC BEANS?
THE OPERATION HAS BEEN PLANNED DOWN TO THE LAST CONTINGENCY BY WHAT IS INARGUABLY THE GREATEST MILITARY MIND ANYWHERE IN THE GALAXY. THE P.D. LED "FLEETMIND."
WE'LL NEED TO SELL ANOTHER COW
SELL THE COW, BUT DON'T BURN THE DUCK
HEY, THAT'S SOME BATCH O' BEANS
I'LL MISS THAT COW
EVEN THE CHARLIE FOXTROTS HAVE BEEN PLANNED. PETEY EXPECTED THOSE FIREWORKS

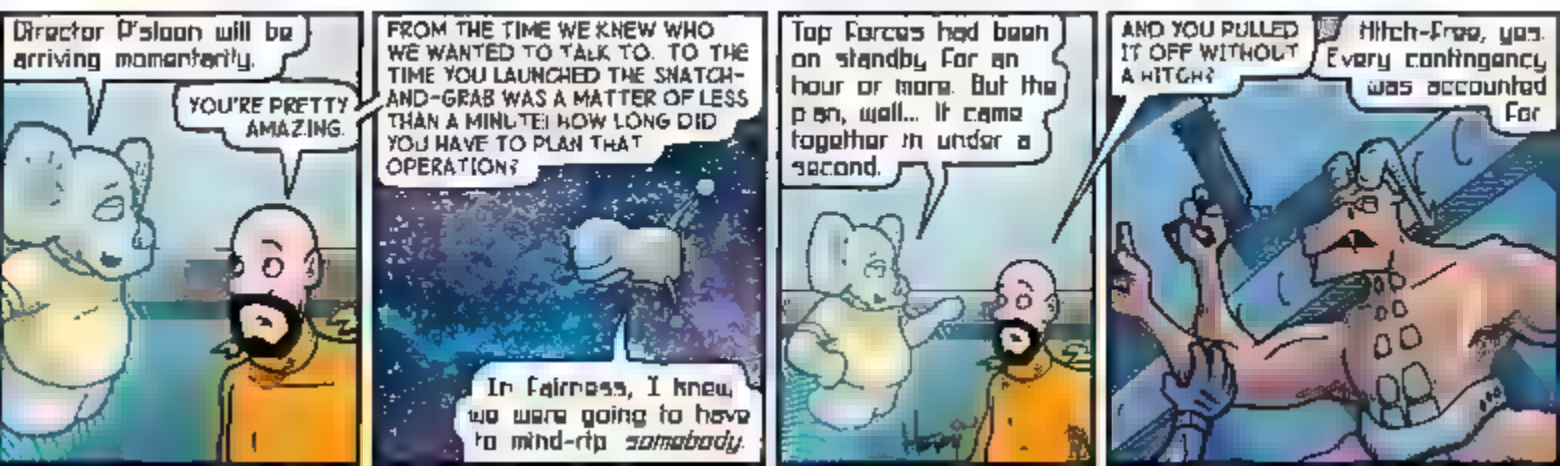

DO WE REALLY NEED TO RESORT TO MIND-RIPPING?
Just this morning you were willing to launch an all-out assault on thousands of F'Shari-Ganni installations, likely killing tens of thousands of them in horrible ways.
Yet you now appear to be uncomfortable with the idea of torturing and killing ONE F'Shari-Ganni in order to save countless trillions of lives.
ARE YOU SAYING I'M BEING HYPOCRITICAL?
No. I'm suggesting that you're more comfortable when people die as blinking lights on a tac-screen than as bleeding, screaming heaps in front of you on the floor.
PLEASE TELL ME A MIND-RIP ISN'T THAT MESSY

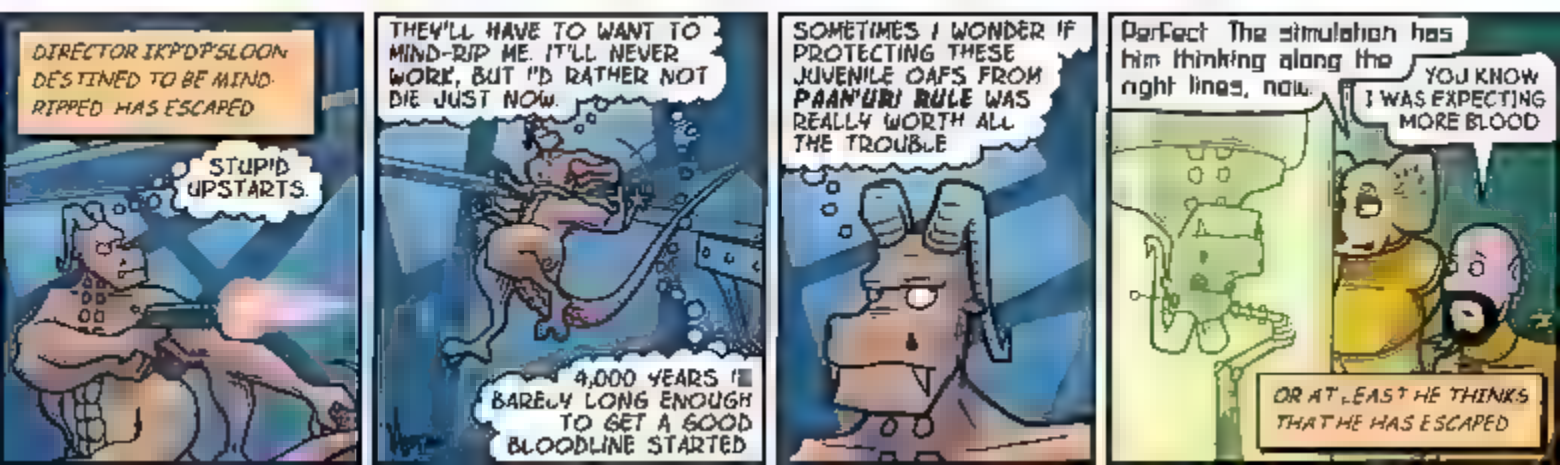

MISTER PETEY, I'M SURE WHAT YOU'RE DOING HERE IS VERY INTERESTING AND IMPORTANT, BUT MY TROOPS AND I WOULD LIKE TO GO HOME NOW
Oh?
I assumed you wanted to stick around until Commander Andreyasn could authorize the rest of your payment
HOW LONG WILL THAT TAKE?
He's not quite well enough to give you a thumb-print yet

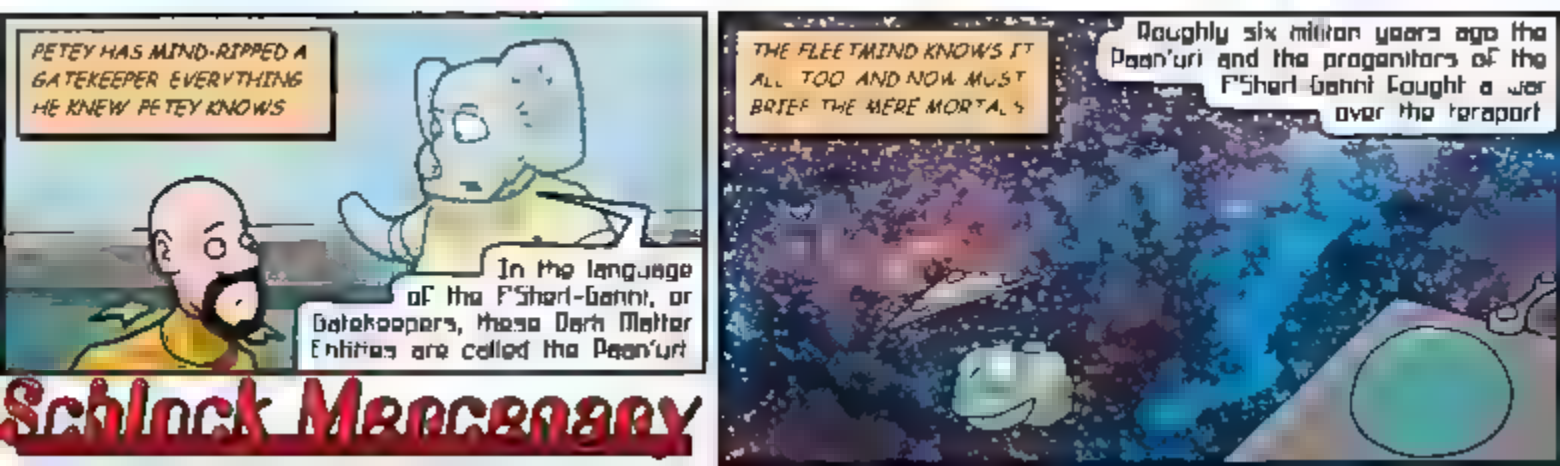
SIR, I STILL HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO RAISE THE INTEGRITY
KEEP AT IT GISH.
Actually, You're wasting your time.

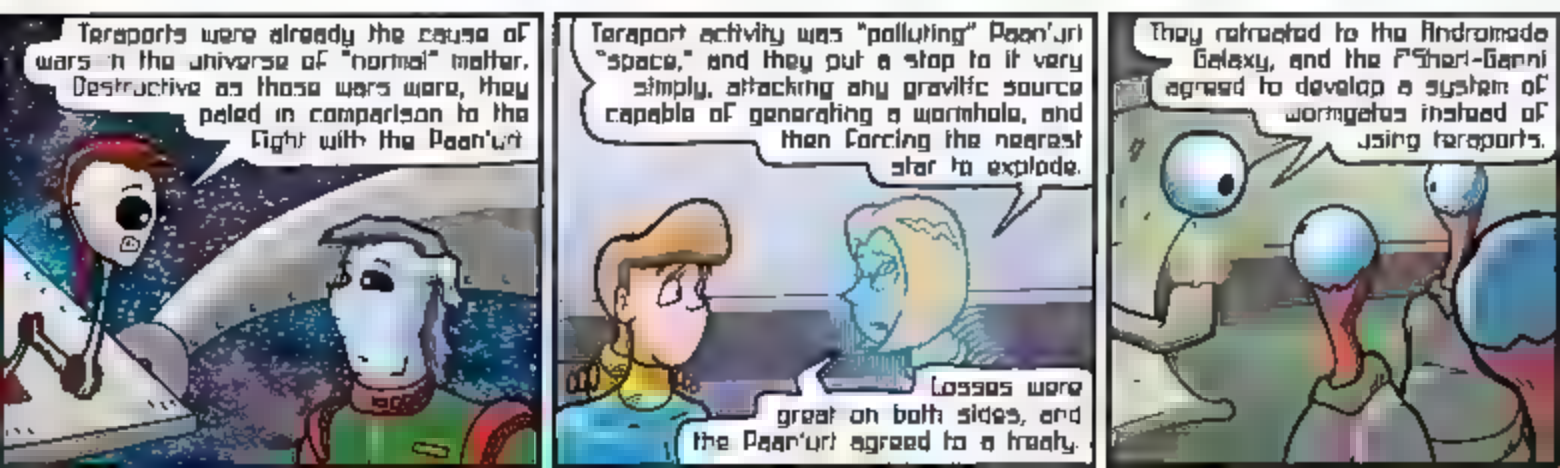
My satellite taps indicate that your flagship is aground and has been confiscated. Ystraban government forces appear to be treating your men well, but I would expect them to have locked down external communications.

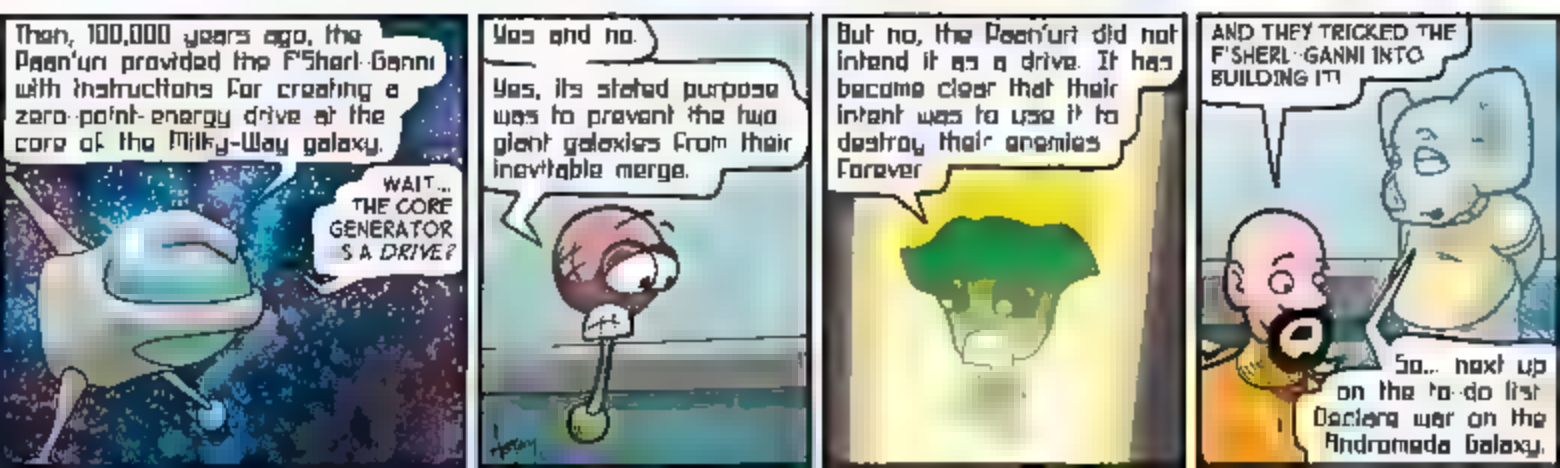

There does seem to be some chatter about the question of salvage rights
Hey, I killed it I get to KEEP it.

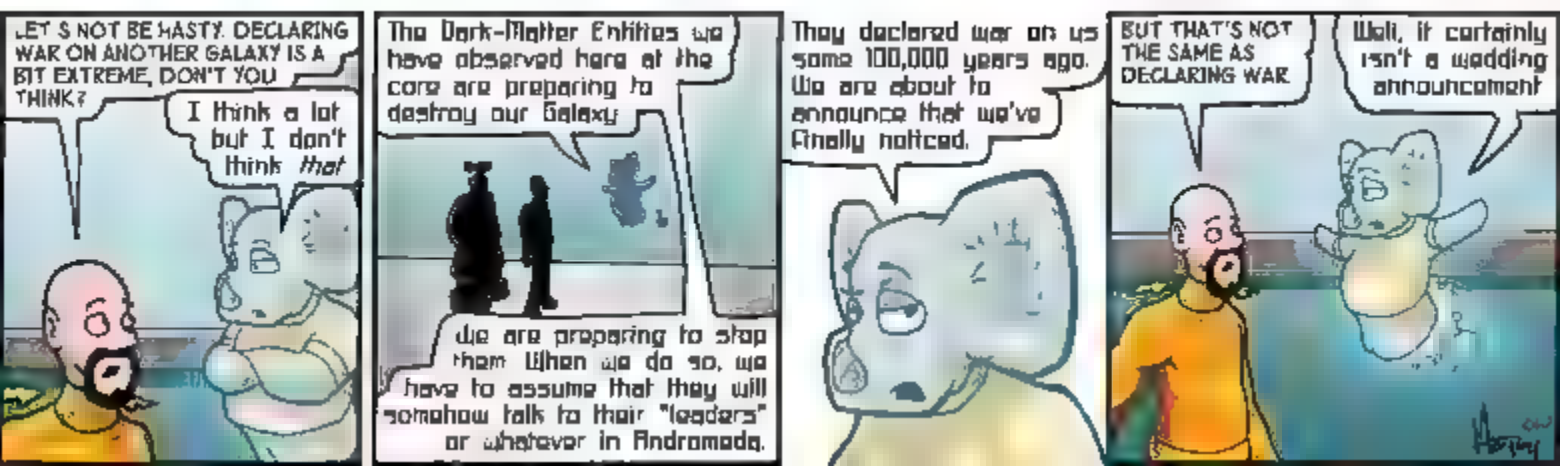

Director O'Sloon will be arriving momentarily.
YOU'RE PRETTY AMAZING.
FROM THE TIME WE KNEW WHO WE WANTED TO TALK TO. TO THE TIME YOU LAUNCHED THE SNATCH-AND-GRAB WAS A MATTER OF LESS THAN A MINUTE! HOW LONG DID YOU HAVE TO PLAN THAT OPERATION?
In fairness, I knew we were going to have to mind-rip *somebody*.
Top forces had been on standby for an hour or more. But the plan, well... it came together in under a second.
AND YOU PULLED IT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH?
Hitch-free, yes. Every contingency was accounted for


DIRECTOR IKPDPSLOON DESTINED TO BE MIND-RIPPED HAS ESCAPED
STUPID UPSTARTS.
THEY'LL HAVE TO WANT TO MIND-RIP ME. IT'LL NEVER WORK, BUT I'D RATHER NOT DIE JUST NOW.
4,000 YEARS IS BARELY LONG ENOUGH TO GET A GOOD BLOODLINE STARTED
SOMETIMES I WONDER IF PROTECTING THESE JUVENILE OAFS FROM PAAN'URI RULE WAS REALLY WORTH ALL THE TROUBLE
Perfect. The simulation has him thinking along the right lines, now.
YOU KNOW I WAS EXPECTING MORE BLOOD
OR AT LEAST HE THINKS THAT HE HAS ESCAPED

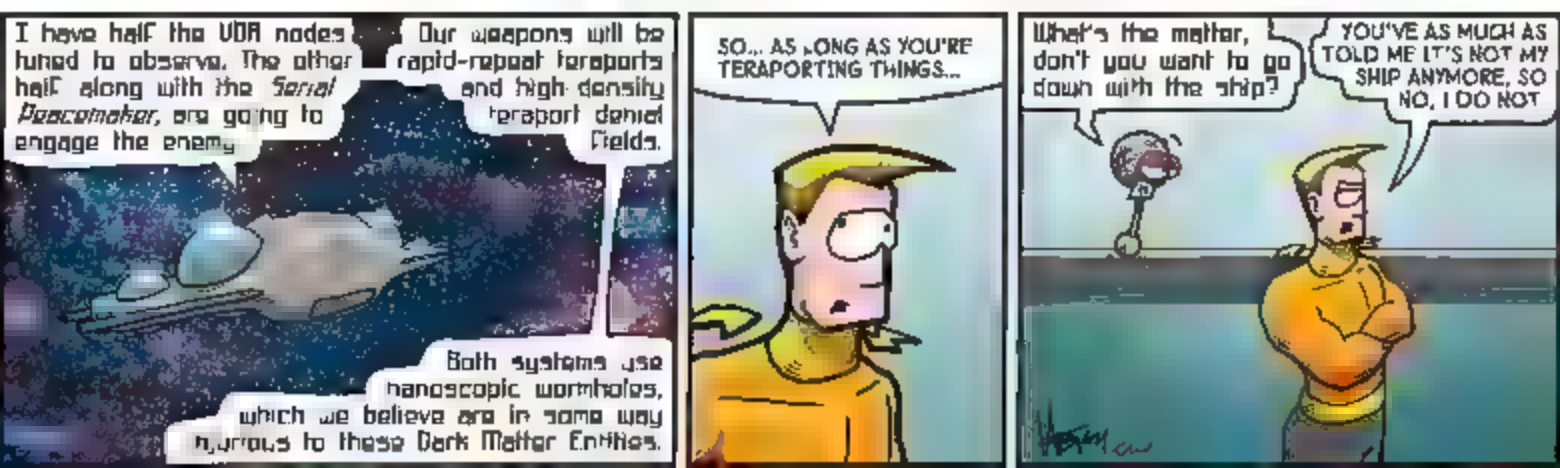

PETEY HAS MIND-RIPPED A GATEKEEPER EVERYTHING HE KNEW PETEY KNOWS
In the language of the F'Shari-Gonni, or Gatekeepers, these Dark Matter Entities are called the Peen'uri
Schlock Mercenary
THE FLEETMIND KNOWS IT ALL TOO AND NOW MUST BRIEF THE MERE MORTALS
Roughly six million years ago the Peen'uri and the progenitors of the F'Shari-Gonni fought a war over the teraport

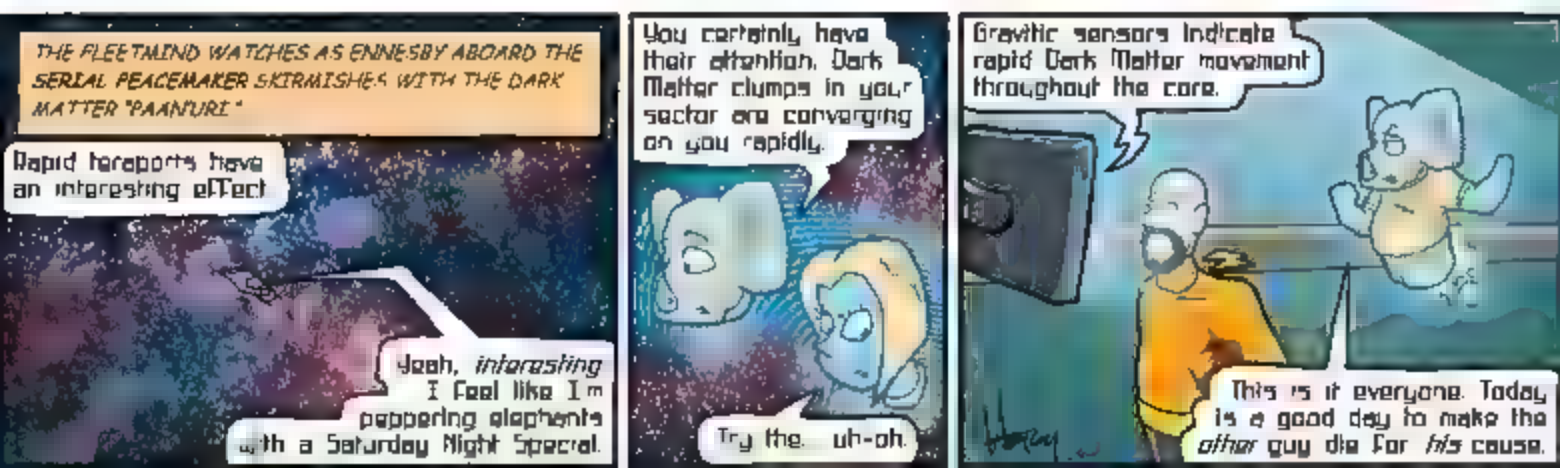

Teraports were already the cause of wars in the universe of "normal" matter. Destructive as those wars were, they paled in comparison to the fight with the Paan'un.
Teraport activity was "polluting" Paan'un "space," and they put a stop to it very simply, attacking any gravitic source capable of generating a wormhole, and then forcing the nearest star to explode.
Losses were great on both sides, and the Paan'un agreed to a treaty.
They retreated to the Andromeda Galaxy, and the F'Shari-Ganni agreed to develop a system of wormgates instead of using teraports.

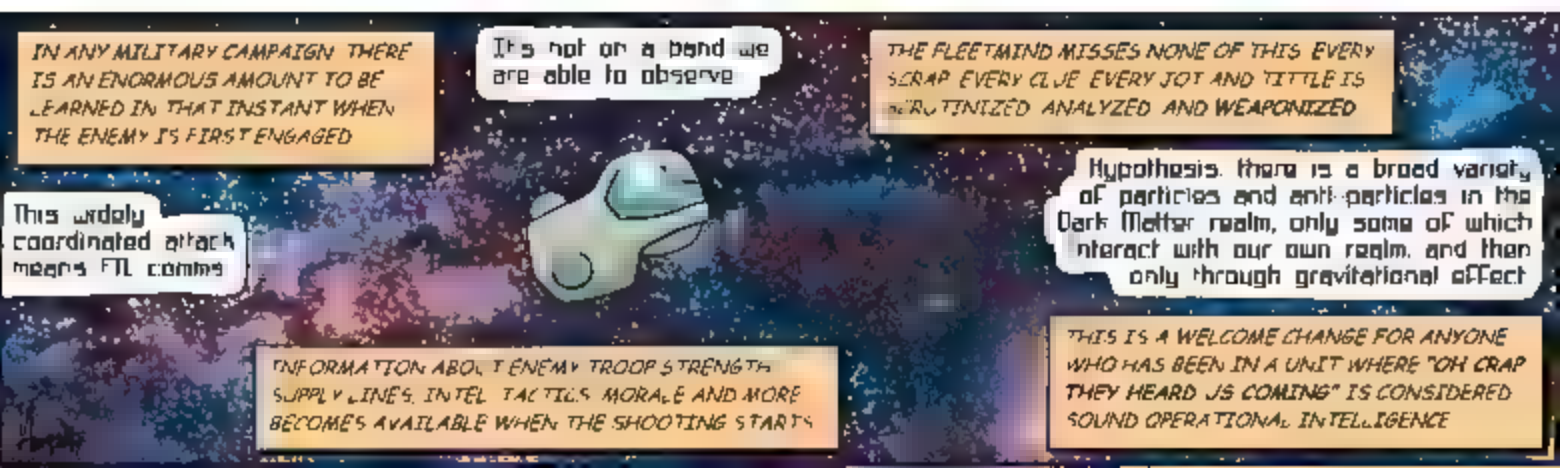

Then, 100,000 years ago, the Peen'un provided the F'Sherl-Ganni with instructions for creating a zero-point-energy drive at the core of the Milky-Way galaxy.
WAIT... THE CORE GENERATOR IS A DRIVE?
Yes and no.
Yes, its stated purpose was to prevent the two giant galaxies from their inevitable merge.
But no, the Peen'un did not intend it as a drive. It has become clear that their intent was to use it to destroy their enemies forever.
AND THEY TRICKED THE F'SHERL-GANNI INTO BUILDING IT!
So... next up on the to-do list: Declare war on the Andromeda Galaxy.

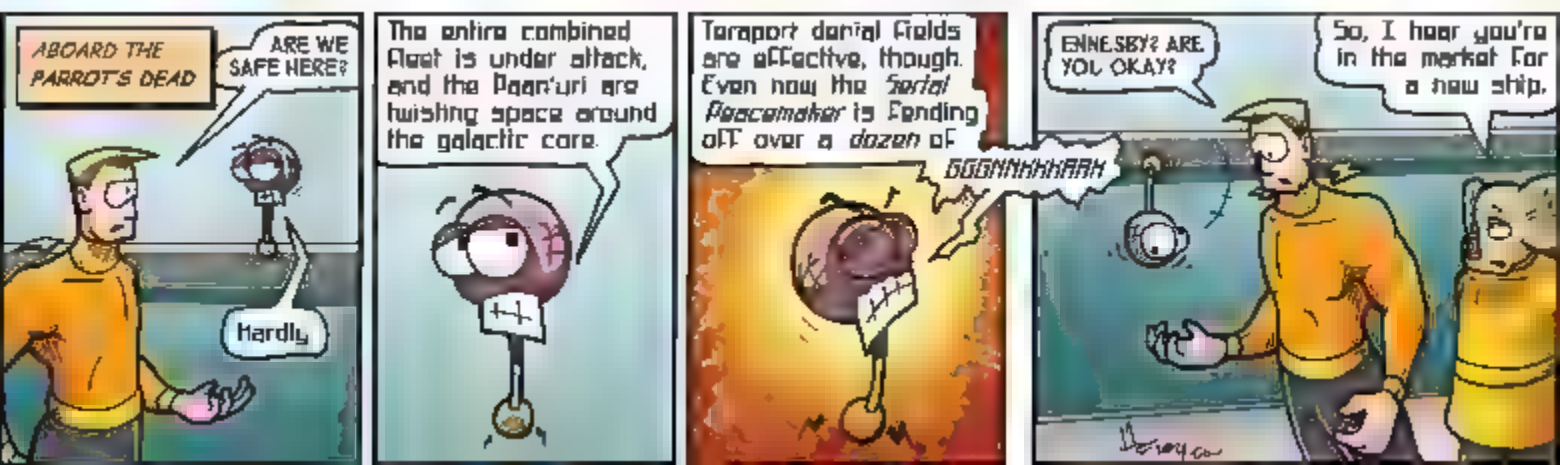

LET'S NOT BE HASTY. DECLARING WAR ON ANOTHER GALAXY IS A BIT EXTREME, DON'T YOU THINK?
I think a lot but I don't think *that*
The Dark-Matter Entities we have observed here at the core are preparing to destroy our Galaxy
We are preparing to stop them. When we do so, we have to assume that they will somehow talk to their "leaders" or whatever in Andromeda.
They declared war on us some 100,000 years ago. We are about to announce that we've finally noticed.
BUT THAT'S NOT THE SAME AS DECLARING WAR.
Well, it certainly isn't a wedding announcement

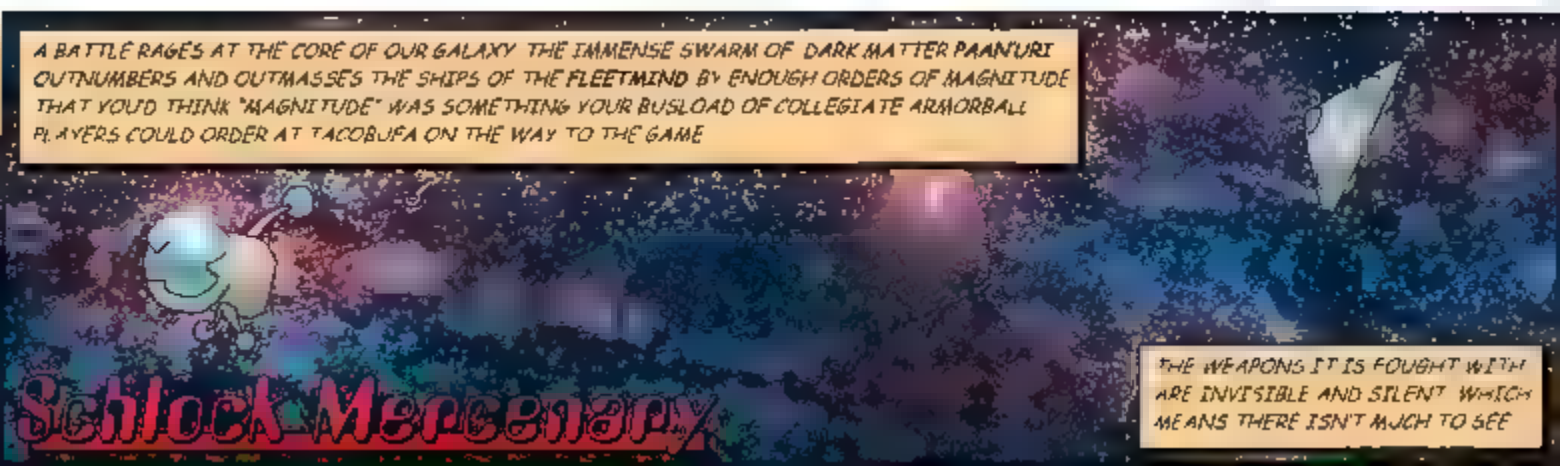
DID DIRECTOR P SLOON KNOW HOW TO FIGHT THE PAAN'URI?
He did not
His knowledge of history did, however, suggest to us that a certain class of weapons might be especially effective
Expendable fleet units are skirmishing with those weapons right now.
WAIT... WE'RE WHAT?
What can I say? I was suckered in by the "Do your part to defeat the Dark Menace" slogan.

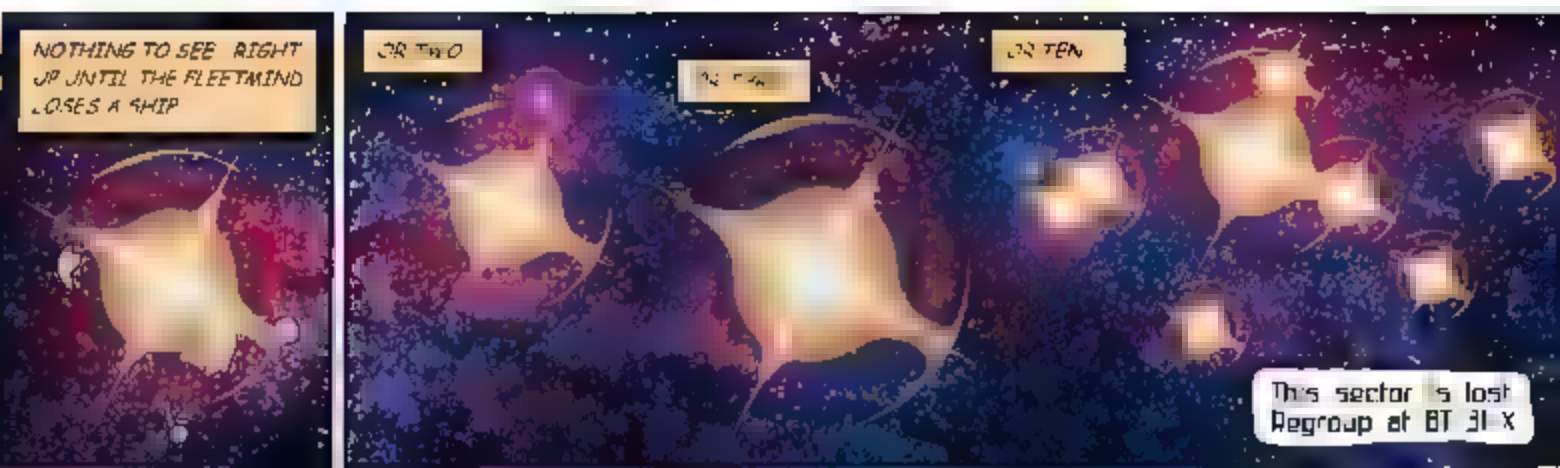

I have half the VDR nodes tuned to observe. The other half along with the *Serial Peacemaker*, are going to engage the enemy.
Our weapons will be rapid-repeat teraports and high density teraport denial fields.
Both systems use nanoscopic wormholes, which we believe are in some way hyrrous to these Dark Matter Entities.
SO... AS LONG AS YOU'RE TERAPORTING THINGS...
What's the matter, don't you want to go down with the ship?
YOU'VE AS MUCH AS TOLD ME IT'S NOT MY SHIP ANYMORE, SO NO, I DO NOT

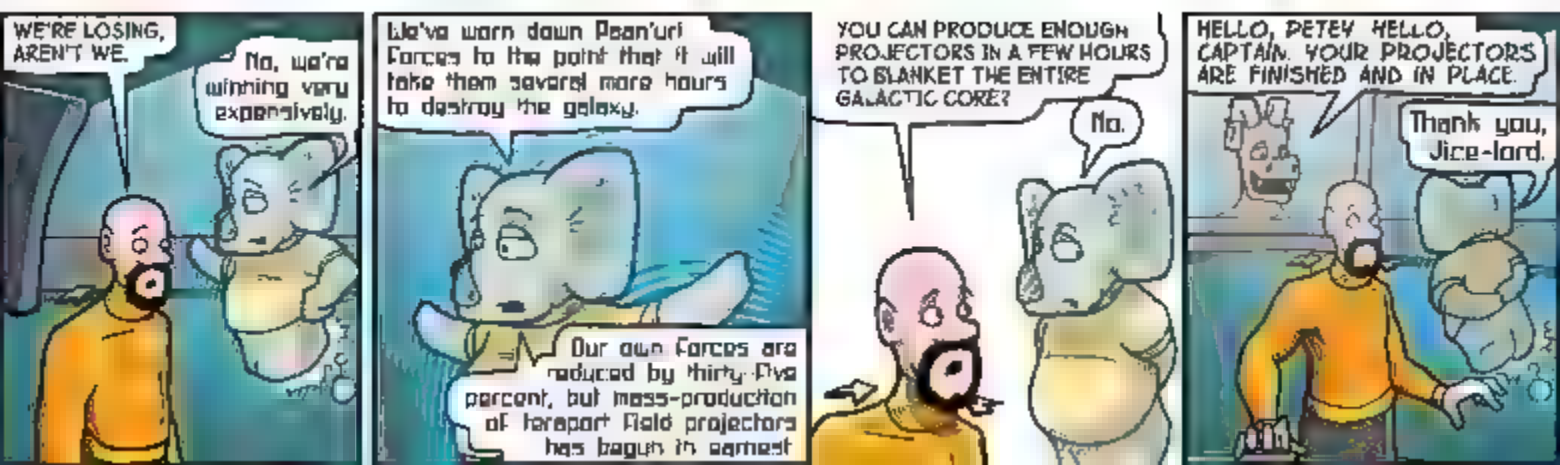

THE FLEETMIND WATCHES AS ENNESBY ABOARD THE SERIAL PEACEMAKER SKIRMISHES WITH THE DARK MATTER "PAANURI."
Rapid teleports have an interesting effect.
Yeah, *interesting*. I feel like I'm peppering elephants with a Saturday Night Special.
You certainly have their attention. Dark Matter clumps in your sector are converging on you rapidly.
Try the... uh-oh.
Gravitic sensors indicate rapid Dark Matter movement throughout the core.
This is it everyone. Today is a good day to make the *other* guy die for *his* cause.

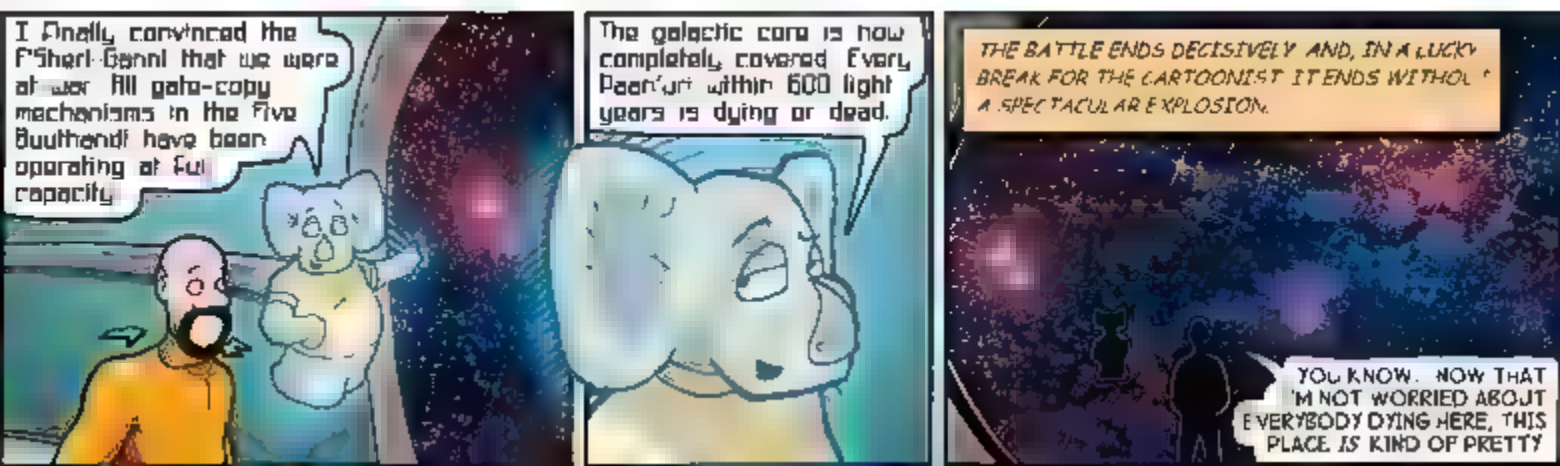

IN ANY MILITARY CAMPAIGN THERE IS AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT TO BE LEARNED IN THAT INSTANT WHEN THE ENEMY IS FIRST ENGAGED
It's not on a band we are able to observe
THE FLEETMIND MISSES NONE OF THIS EVERY SCRAP EVERY CLUE EVERY JOT AND TITTLE IS SCRUTINIZED ANALYZED AND WEAPONIZED
This widely coordinated attack means FTL comms
Hypothesis: there is a broad variety of particles and anti-particles in the Dark Matter realm, only some of which interact with our own realm, and then only through gravitational effect
INFORMATION ABOUT ENEMY TROOP STRENGTH SUPPLY LINES, INTEL TACTICS MORALE AND MORE BECOMES AVAILABLE WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTS
THIS IS A WELCOME CHANGE FOR ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN IN A UNIT WHERE "OH CRAP THEY HEARD US COMING" IS CONSIDERED SOUND OPERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE


ABOARD THE PARROT'S DEAD
ARE WE SAFE HERE?
Hardly.
The entire combined fleet is under attack, and the Paan'uri are twisting space around the galactic core.
Teraport dental fields are effective, though. Even now the Serial Peacemaker is fending off over a dozen of
GGGNNNNNNNNN
ENNESBY? ARE YOU OKAY?
So, I hear you're in the market for a new ship.

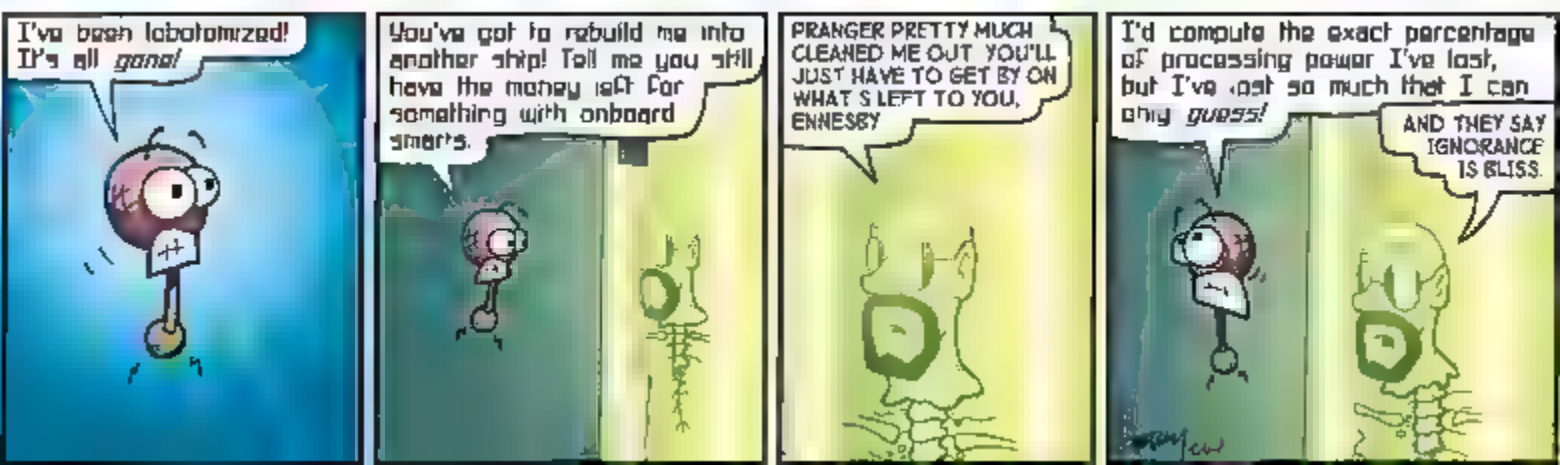

A BATTLE RAGES AT THE CORE OF OUR GALAXY THE IMMENSE SWARM OF DARK MATTER PAAN'URI OUTNUMBERS AND OUTMASSES THE SHIPS OF THE FLEETMIND BY ENOUGH ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE THAT YOU'D THINK "MAGNITUDE" WAS SOMETHING YOUR BUSLOAD OF COLLEGIATE ARMORBALL PLAYERS COULD ORDER AT TACOBUFA ON THE WAY TO THE GAME
THE WEAPONS IT IS FOUGHT WITH ARE INVISIBLE AND SILENT WHICH MEANS THERE ISN'T MUCH TO SEE
Schlock Mercenary

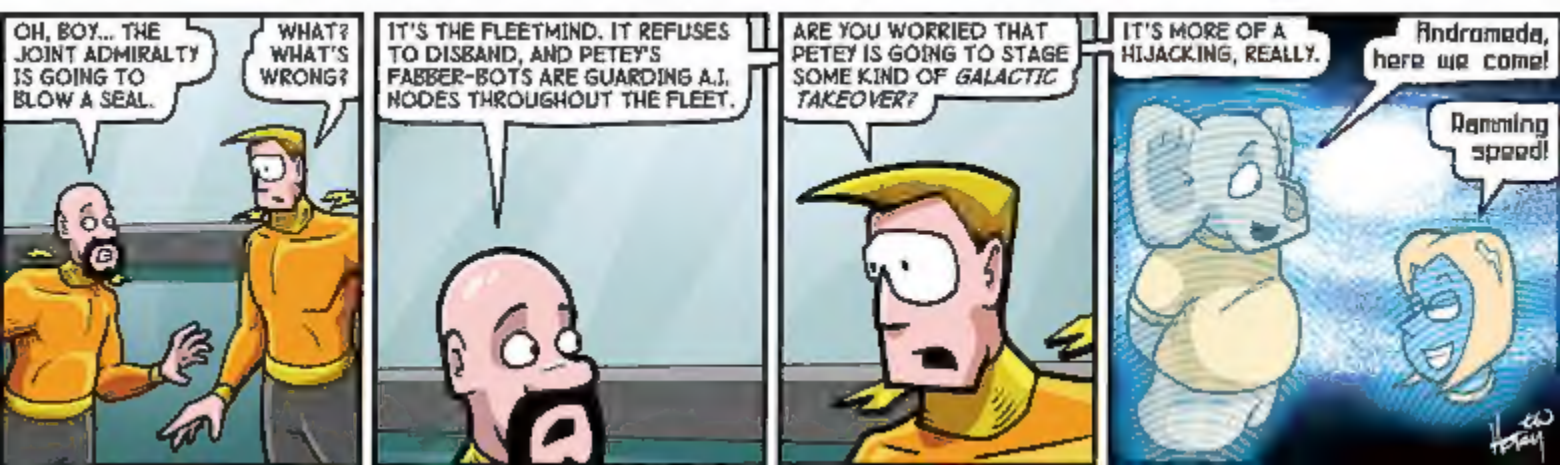

NOTHING TO SEE RIGHT UP UNTIL THE FLEETMIND LOSES A SHIP
OR TWO
OR TEN
This sector is lost
Regroup at BT 31 X

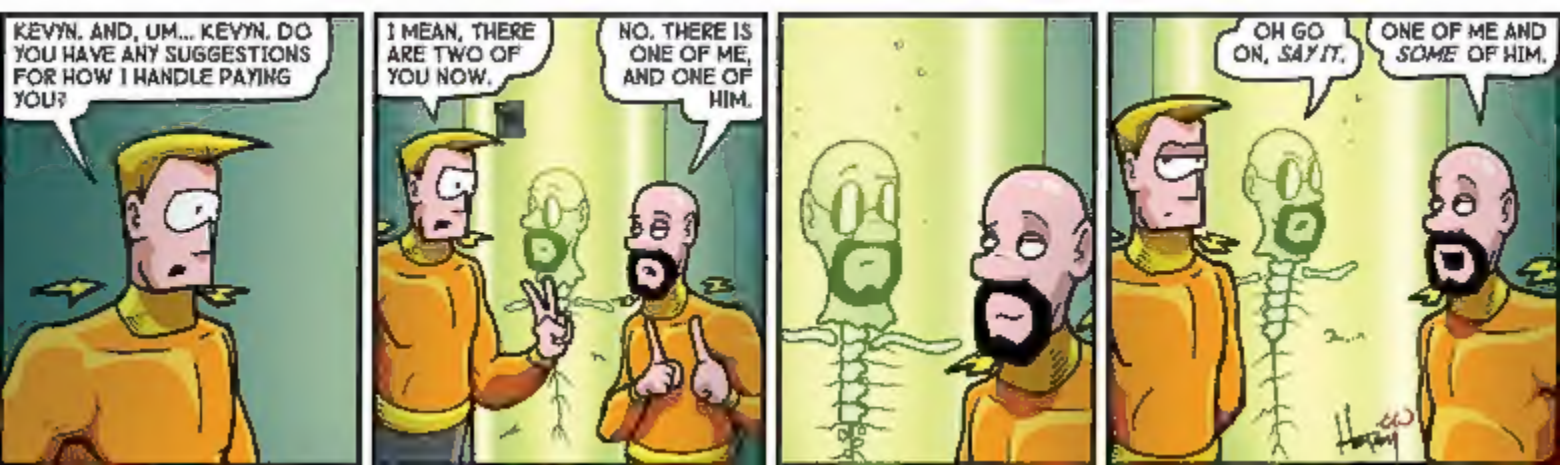

WE'RE LOSING, AREN'T WE.
No, we're winning very expensively.
We've worn down Pean'uri Forces to the point that it will take them several more hours to destroy the galaxy.
Our own Forces are reduced by thirty-five percent, but mass-production of teleport field projectors has begun in earnest
YOU CAN PRODUCE ENOUGH PROJECTORS IN A FEW HOURS TO BLANKET THE ENTIRE GALACTIC CORE?
No.
HELLO, PETEY. HELLO, CAPTAIN. YOUR PROJECTORS ARE FINISHED AND IN PLACE.
Thank you, Jice-lord.


I finally convinced the P'Sherl-Gennl that we were at war. All gate-copy mechanisms in the Five Buuthendl have been operating at full capacity.
The galactic core is now completely covered. Every Paan'uri within 600 light years is dying or dead.
THE BATTLE ENDS DECISIVELY AND, IN A LUCKY BREAK FOR THE CARTOONIST, IT ENDS WITHOUT A SPECTACULAR EXPLOSION.
YOU KNOW... NOW THAT I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT EVERYBODY DYING HERE, THIS PLACE IS KIND OF PRETTY

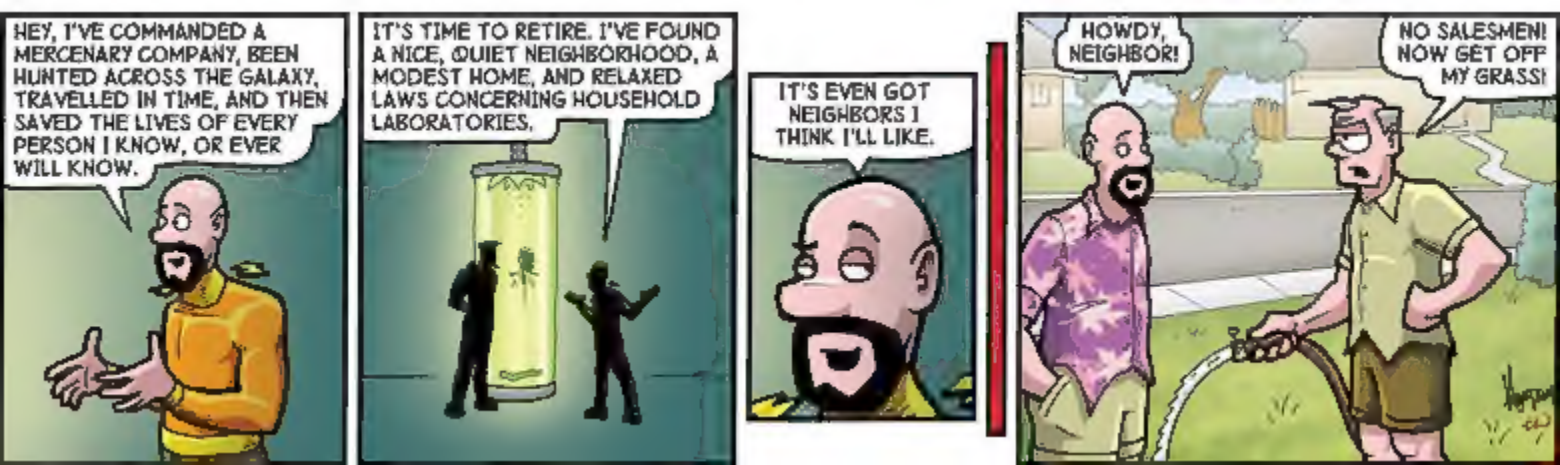
I'M HERE TO COLLECT COMMANDER
PER THE "EXPENSES" CLAUSE, I'M BILLING YOU FOR THE LOSS OF MY FLAGSHIP, ALL MATERIEL ABOARD, AND ONE COMBAT SHUTTLE
FINE PAYMENT AUTHORIZED
THANK YOU, COMMANDER. WE'LL HAVE TO DO THIS AGAIN SOMETIME ONLY WITHOUT QUITE SO MUCH ANTIMATTER
THE PROBLEM WASN'T THE ANTIMATTER THE PROBLEM WAS THE DELIVERY SYSTEM.
INDEED I TRUST YOU WON'T TAKE OFFENSE IF I DECLINE TO STAND ON THE SAME PLANET WITH YOU IN THE FUTURE?


I've been lobotomized! It's all *gone!*
You've got to rebuild me into another ship! Tell me you still have the money left for something with onboard smarts.
PRANGER PRETTY MUCH CLEANED ME OUT. YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO GET BY ON WHAT'S LEFT TO YOU, ENNESBY.
I'd compute the exact percentage of processing power I've lost, but I've lost so much that I can only *guess!*
AND THEY SAY IGNORANCE IS BLISS.


OH, BOY... THE JOINT ADMIRALTY IS GOING TO BLOW A SEAL.
WHAT? WHAT'S WRONG?
IT'S THE FLEETMIND. IT REFUSES TO DISBAND, AND PETEY'S FABBER-BOTS ARE GUARDING A.I. NODES THROUGHOUT THE FLEET.
ARE YOU WORRIED THAT PETEY IS GOING TO STAGE SOME KIND OF *GALACTIC TAKEOVER?*
IT'S MORE OF A HIJACKING, REALLY.
Andromeda, here we come!
Ramming speed!


KEVYN. AND, UM... KEVYN. DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW I HANDLE PAYING YOU?
I MEAN, THERE ARE TWO OF YOU NOW.
NO. THERE IS ONE OF ME, AND ONE OF HIM.
OH GO ON, *SAY IT.*
ONE OF ME AND *SOME* OF HIM.

THE QUESTION OF PAY IS IRRELEVANT. YOU KEEP PAYING HIM. I'VE *GOT* ALL THE MONEY I NEED.
YOUR STOCK PICKING WAS INGENIOUS, BUT YOU WORKED TOO HARD.
ME, I BOUGHT LOTTERY TICKETS.
YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CAPTAIN'S UNIFORM BACK. I'M TRADING UP FOR FLORAL PRINTS, SHORTS, AND SOME OF THOSE DRINKS WITH LITTLE UMBRELLAS IN THEM.
WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF ADVENTURE?
IT DIED UNDER MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. MY SENSE OF SELF-PRESERVATION FOUND THE BODY, BUT ASSURES ME IT HAS AN AIRTIGHT ALIBI.


HEY, I'VE COMMANDED A MERCENARY COMPANY, BEEN HUNTED ACROSS THE GALAXY, TRAVELLED IN TIME, AND THEN SAVED THE LIVES OF EVERY PERSON I KNOW, OR EVER WILL KNOW.
IT'S TIME TO RETIRE. I'VE FOUND A NICE, QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD, A MODEST HOME, AND RELAXED LAWS CONCERNING HOUSEHOLD LABORATORIES.
IT'S EVEN GOT NEIGHBORS I THINK I'LL LIKE.
HOWDY, NEIGHBOR!
NO SALESMEN! NOW GET OFF MY GRASS!